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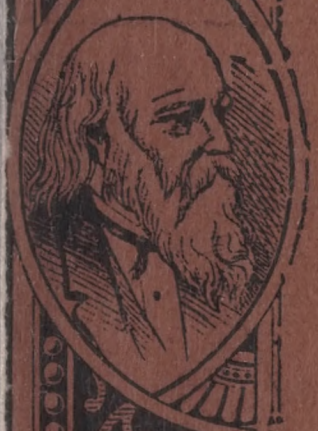
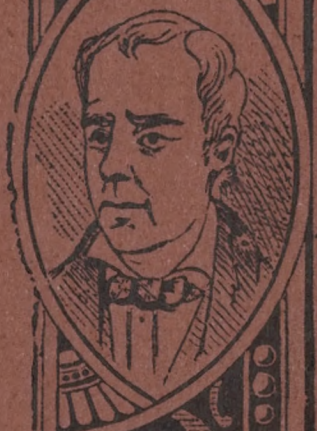
# WIFE OR SLAVE.





+BY+

The Author of "NOT TO BE WON."

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NORMAN L. MUNRO, PUBLISHER,
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# WIFE OR SLAVE.

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By the Author of "NOT TO BE WON."

Mrs. Henry Wood.

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# WIFE OR SLAVE.

By the Author of "NOT TO BE WON."

## CHAPTER I.

### THE MEETING.

CHARLES LEICESTER was the younger son of a prominent New York lawyer, with high social standing on his father's, and money on his mother's side.

Having through his mother an independent fortune, he had, until the age of three and twenty, put off doing anything but travel and learn languages.

He had a vague idea that some of these days he would do something, as through his father's influence he could always command a position in the diplomatic service.

As he was no idler, content to live on the proceeds of his mother's twenty thousand dollars, he had for some time been busy pondering in his mind what would be the wisest course to pursue.

He was in Rome with a friend about his own age.

He had done all the usual rounds, and so a virtuous fit was on him.

"Denby," he said to his young friend, as they yawned over the late breakfast at the fashionable American hotel: "I am getting tired of all this; besides, my father seriously wishes me to be doing something."

"Charles Leicester," responded the young man, with a slight lisp which is better imagined than imitated on paper, "how can you speak in that ridiculous way?"

"I am not independent," retorted Leicester. "I must either put myself in harness or marry."

"How very horrible," said Denby, with an expression of comic terror; "well, I suppose one has to do it some day, but at our age, the very thought of such self-sacrifice is horrible."

"I do not think so," observed Charles, with a look of

profound wisdom; "there is a great deal to be said on the matrimonial side, but I won't say it."

"Don't, there's a good fellow."

"I will not until I meet the right person," laughed Charles; "but to-day is Monday. I think of starting on Friday."

"Heaven! On Friday," lisped Denby. "Oh, no, Saturday; besides, Thursday we go to Doria's, and shall be too tired next day."

"I am tired of breakfasts, balls, parties, of everything," said Charles, with a sigh.

His friend looked keenly at him, not at all satisfied with his words.

"Where have you been these last few days, while I have been playing propriety with the Mowbray girls?" asked he.

"Doing the round of the studios. I spent four hours with Chalfront yesterday," replied Charles, concluding his words with an obvious sigh.

This sigh caused his friend to think very much, but as he knew his companion to be singularly touchy on certain points, he said nothing, but determined to wait and watch.

He knew that Charles had a very susceptible heart, and was very much afraid that he had tumbled over some beauty of inferior rank and position, of whom he was either ashamed, or, at all events, ashamed to speak.

As it was, he called around to bid farewell to his old friends, the Mowbrays, and left his sensitive friend to his reflections.

Whatever these may have been, he quietly kept them to himself.

And so the days passed until that of the Doria's ball, which was to be one of the most brilliant affairs that had taken place in Rome for some time past.

All the English and American colony were to be invited.

That is to say, those who could show their claims either in blue blood or money.

The latter generally goes the farthest in Italy, whose degenerate princes and nobles judge people by the length of their purse.

Charles Leicester was perfectly listless about the matter, but his friend, Denby, was decided to keep him up to the mark.

He had promised that his handsome *compagnon de voyaye* should on that night know his distant relatives.

Charles was too good-hearted, and too good-natured not to acquiesce in all the young man's demands, and accord-

ingly, at ten o'clock on the night in question, he was ready to accompany him to the ball.

Unlike many of the princes of Rome, the Duke Di Doria was very rich, and had thrown open his superb apartments in regal style.

Soft music, beautiful flowers, pictures, marbles, which only Italy can produce, were there, also lovely and superb women, and over all was cast a voluptuous languor, which is caused by the climate.

The music and the fragrant warmth, acting in combined effect, made every one ready for the dance at once, and as soon as the rooms were full enough to justify so doing, the dancing began.

Charles Leicester was intimately known by name to the Miss Mowbrays, and they were very glad to be personally introduced by their cousin.

They were well-bred girls, without affectation of any kind, and were both almost equally handsome, Blanche and Violet.

They were delicately fair girls, with rich, auburn locks, which in deference to the unmeaning exigencies of society, were fastened up in some style as abhorrent to nature as to beauty.

They had received a good education, and were pleasant and conversable.

Charles Leicester having once taken charge of Miss Mowbray, acted as in duty bound.

He conversed on all topics of fashionable and local interest, and impressed his companion very favorably.

But there was to anyone who had been a keen observer, a listlessness in his manner, varied at moments by deep anxiety, which indicated that though his body was present, his mind was far away.

Presently, after two dances with the young lady, Charles Leicester handed her over to the custody of her mother, and sauntered off.

At some distance he had noticed his friend Chalfont, the artist, one of the most popular Americans in Rome, a dark-haired young man, with a dreadful expression, as some were wont to say, while others described him as an uncommonly fine fellow.

He was alone, and was looking around with a rather *blase*, listless manner, until he saw Leicester, when his eye lighted up with pleasure.

"So you have not left Rome?" he said.

"No; despite all my resolutions, I have delayed again. Denby could not give up this affair, so I stayed," replied Leicester.

"Ain't you very much bored?" asked Chalfont.

"Infinitely so," responded Leicester.

"Well, then, suppose we adjourn. We can be back in time to show ourselves," continued Chalfont, with something very much like a yawn; "this is too slow for me."

"Where would you go?" asked Leicester.

"To the Casino Varese," observed the artist.

Now the Casino Varese was said to be a very wicked place.

In truth it was a private house owned by a countess, where *roulette* was played, and which was winked at by the authorities, because it was supported by a class not easily to be offended.

Leicester had never been there.

Some impulse which he could neither explain nor control, made him anxious at that moment to go, though, hitherto, he had always avoided any such localities.

They glided down-stairs, took their cloaks, and were driven to the street where the residence of the Countess Varese was situated.

It was in a dark and obscure street, and reached from under an archway.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE CASINO VARESE.

THE rooms thrown open by the elderly countess were several in number, and were severally devoted to dancing, conversation, and play.

As very many eminent and agreeable people were to be met with, it was frequented by persons who never thought of touching a card or engaging in games of chance.

Chalfont and Leicester, as they made their way through the rooms, saluted several acquaintances, and thus gradually gained the apartment devoted to business.

Charles Leicester had never been a gambler, but was always ready to make a hand at whist.

The sight before him now was novel.

Around the table, eager, fierce, careless, anxious, according to their several characters, sat men and women, waiting the decision of the deity of chance.

It was not a pleasant sight, as a rule, and Charles was about to turn away, when his very heart seemed to stand still, his cheeks became deadly pale, then flushed, and he stood open-mouthed—transfixed.

His eye had fallen on a girl, to all appearance a mere child, who was watching the game with an interest and anxiety that was entrancing.

Never had he seen a head set so beautifully on feminine shoulders.

Never had he seen so perfect a face, never gazed on eyes that more resembled what the poet calls wave-washed onyxes.

Then, as she threw down some more money to replace that which she had lost, she did so with such a melodious laugh Charles Leicester believed he had never heard in this world.

He turned and clutched Chalfont's arm.

"The original of the portrait," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"Yes; what do you think of her?" responded Chalfont, with affected carelessness.

He did not answer for a moment.

His eyes were again fixed on her, as he asked himself several questions.

Was she beautiful, or was she not beautiful?

What was the secret of form or expression which gave such electric power to her glance in that slight and fragile being?

Which genius was predominant, the good or the evil?

"She is very beautiful," he said, with a sigh; "but what should a young girl like her be doing at the *roulette* table?"

"Miriam Di Lasso seems haunted by the demon of unrest," replied the artist. "She is believed to be stupendously rich. She is traveling under the guardianship of a rather ill-looking grandee, a duenna, and with a train of servants. She goes everywhere. I understood she was to have been at the Prince Doria's to-night."

"You know her?" asked Leicester.

"I have painted her portrait, and have got on intimate terms with herself and friends."

"Can you introduce me?" eagerly demanded the young man.

"With pleasure," said Chalfont, scarcely able to restrain a smile at the other's excitement. "Come this way."

And he advanced to the gaming table.

The young lady turned, and nodded with a sweet smile.

"One moment," she said, with a sweetness of tone which added powerfully to her other charms; "let me know my fate."

She had doubled her stake on the well-known martingale system, and had lost.

She arose carelessly, and hurried toward the artist with a look of almost comic deprecation.

Then Charles saw that in addition to her beauty of face she had that form, with the long, flexible throat, the long, narrow eyes, which give some women, for good or ill, something of the characteristics of the serpent.

"You are going?" said Chalfont.

"Well, yes, I really do not know why I came except to relieve my ennui. I promised the marquis to meet him at the Doria's, but got my faithful Garcia to bring me here."

"My friend here," replied the artist, "Mr. Charles Leicester, wishes for an introduction."

She raised her eyes to the young man's face, and after two or three more words, frankly held out her hand.

Charles was, as it were, magnetized.

There was something in her glance which seemed to overcome his whole being, while the touch of her hand appeared to thrill to his heart of hearts.

"Mr. Chalfont will bring you to my morning receptions," she said, with a seductive smile; "we shall thus become better acquainted. I must now away to Palazzo Doria."

And beckoning to a grave-looking lady in rich, black silk and lace to join her, she bowed herself away.

"Who or what is she?" asked Charles of his artistic friend.

"A kind of female Sphinx," replied the other. "Her name is Miriam Di Lasso. She is of Spanish Mexican origin, and is believed to own large property in that country. But she is very reticent about herself."

"She has friends?"

"She is under the tutelage and guardianship of a certain Marquis Di Trejico. I have no doubt it was to escape from his wearisome watching she came here."

"Let us return to the Palace Doria," said Charles Leicester, abruptly.

"With all my heart," laughingly responded Chalfont, "though it were wiser to tempt fortune here than to follow in the footsteps of a siren."

Charles Leicester simply shrugged his shoulders.

Going out, they were driven back to the residence of the prince.

In the crush of fashion and beauty their absence had been scarcely observed.

No sooner were they in the room than Charles left his companion, and took an apparently aimless walk about the apartment.

But his eyes were not idle.

He contrived to see all his acquaintances and friends just in time to glide away and avoid them.

But he was evidently in search of some one.

Soon his search was rewarded.

Seated on a couch in a retired part of the room, as if resting, was Miriam Di Lasso, accompanied only by her duenna, Garcia, as she called her.

There was a weary look on her beautiful face, which struck Charles Leicester with a sudden pang.

Still he advanced with a low bow to where she sat.

He was startled at the mingled expression of shame and fright which seemed to rest upon her face.

Next instant this was gone, and was replaced by a sweet and sunny smile.

"All alone, Miss Di Lasso?" he said, in almost a humble tone. "Am I intruding?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "I contrived to slip in without being observed, and was enjoying a few moments of repose. Do you know, Mr. Leicester, that too much pleasure is wearisome?"

What surprised the American not a little was the fluency and purity with which she spoke the English language.

He would have liked to have questioned her on this point.

But he was too timid.

There was about her what some one has called a "certain fierceness of maidenhood," which repelled curiosity.

"Well," said he, in as unconcerned a tone as he could assume.

This young man was drifting very rapidly toward a state of mind which bereaves us of common sense.

"There can be no doubt that it can be overdone, but as I have had the pleasure of seeing you to-night for the first time, I can scarcely sympathize with your feelings."

She laughed a silvery laugh, and then continued the conversation.

"I hate flattery," she said, almost fiercely; "I have too much of it. Do you make a long stay in Rome?"

"My movements are very undecided," he replied; "but they are commencing a waltz. May I have the honor?"

She took his arm readily, and soon they were whirling in the mazes of that most voluptuous dance.

Like all of her nation, she was a born dancer, and gave to the amusement her undivided attention.

Charles, who was accustomed to colder and more conventional natures, was amazed.

It was not only the abandon of her manner, but the real delight shown in her eyes and every play of her expressive features.

In truth, he felt he had never danced before.

When they had concluded, and he promenaded the room with her, he was, as it were, in a dream.

Suddenly he came face to face with Denby and Miss Violet Mowbray.

He was so intent, however, on his companion that he

scarcely noticed them, except by a slight inclination of the head, and passed on.

"What a remarkable-looking girl," said the young lady, as they went by. "Who is she?"

"I have not the slightest idea," said Denby. "I was not aware that Leicester had any acquaintances in Rome, except mutual ones."

"She is very beautiful," continued Miss Violet, with all an American girl's frankness and generosity of character.

"Very," he said, dryly.

In the meantime, Charles Leicester and Miriam Di Lasso had sauntered on towards the spot where the duenna awaited them.

She was not alone.

Miriam's dainty gloved hand was leaning on his arm.

He felt it tremble.

Would he not have liked to question her?

"I shall have to introduce you to my guardian," she said, in something of a harsh voice. "He is rather eccentric, but take no notice."

Before Charles could reply, they were in the presence of the duenna and the guardian.

"Marquis Di Trejico," she began, again using her dulcet accents, "this is an American gentleman, Mr. Charles Leicester, who wishes to make our acquaintance. I have asked him to our Monday morning reception."

The marquis was not a pleasant-looking individual.

He was tall, thin, and swarthy.

His complexion had that yellowish tinge which is almost peculiar to the Mexican race, and from which generally Spaniards of pure descent are exempt.

His eyes were small.

His mouth was large, with splendid teeth, which he showed very much when he smiled—as he did now, with a sarcastic expression that he vainly strove to conceal.

"We shall be happy to see the gentleman on Monday in our poor home," he said, in a very impure English. "Shall you be ready to return soon?"

"No, marquis; I have only just come, and have promised this gentleman another dance," she replied, and drew Charles away.

"*Caramba!*" said the Spanish-American, using an expression of the common people. "Where did she pick up this fellow?"

"The Signor Chalfront introduced him."

"*Mil demonios* on both," continued the exasperated marquis; "when will this martyrdom end? What a fool I was to come to Europe."

"I always thought it unwise to leave the sunny shores

of Mexico for cold and calculating northern lands," said the duenna, quietly.

She was a woman of tall stature, with a rather harsh countenance, stern and cold in mien; but her voice had a commanding and metallic ring, that had its influence even on her master.

"It could not be helped," he responded. "But there, next week to Paris and London, and then for America—never to leave it."

It was early morn, despite all the efforts of the irritated guardian, that saw Mariam Di Lasso take her departure.

As far as etiquette and propriety would allow, she had been the companion of Charles Leicester all the evening, a circumstance which exasperated the marquis to the last degree.

What is ordinarily called falling in love at first sight is not a thing impossible, but its genuineness is, as a rule, very much to be questioned.

In the case of Charles Leicester, there could be no doubt; he was very far gone.

There was a subtle influence about this remarkable girl —a power of electricity in her eyes, her walk, her every feature, which was made to subject humanity.

Charles could, in fact, scarcely control his feelings, and certainly would have said or done something rash, but for the intense power of subjection which existed in the beautiful Mexican.

As it was, he handed her over to her guardian after the most reluctant fashion, and then finding Denby, returned to the hotel in silence.

His companion began to think he was wearied and exhausted, and therefore made no effort to speak until they reached their apartments.

"I am dying for a cigar," he then said, casting his slight, aristocratic frame into a chair; "have one, Charles?"

The young man was not at all disposed for anything but repose and thought; but he did not like to do anything to excite suspicion on the part of Denby.

He little knew what was coming.

"Let us have a bottle of champagne or two," observed the young man, who had rung for the obsequious attendant: "these Italians are very chary of their refreshments."

"Willingly," said Charles; "I have tasted nothing all the evening."

"If we are to leave Rome to-morrow," said Denby, in the most innocent of styles, "we must not make a night of it."

"I regret to appear fickle, but I shall not be able to de-

part from Rome as soon as I expected," replied Charles, trying to appear utterly indifferent.

"Indeed! What has happened wholly to change your mind?" asked his friend.

"I have been introduced to some Americans, and am bound to them on Monday," replied Charles.

"Was that lady I saw you with an American?" asked Denby, in some surprise.

"A Mexican Spaniard," said Charles. "I never saw her before to-night: but I have admired her portrait on several occasions. Will you go with me on Monday?"

"With pleasure," responded Denby, and soon after they parted.

"The sooner I get Charley away the better," mused the young man: "these foreign adventurers are very cunning, and I am afraid the poor fellow is very hard hit."

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## CHAPTER III.

### MONDAY.

CHARLES LEICESTER, usually so unromantic and practical, showed very few signs of his usual character on the occasion.

As soon as he arose on the afternoon of Friday, he dressed and went out, very much, as his valet said, like an Italian brigand.

He did wear a cloak and a slouched hat, for the simple reason that he did not want to be recognized.

As Charles Leicester had no other design than to wander around the residence of the beautiful Mexican, no one could gainsay him.

She resided in a palace near the Corso, and Charles Leicester, seeing several persons enter, had a great mind to follow in their train and present himself to the beautiful girl, who so strongly filled his mind, before the day when he was invited.

But etiquette has its iron barriers and chains, which are not to be broken with impunity.

He was, however, to a certain extent rewarded for his assiduity.

An open carriage presently emerged from the court-yard, and in this were seated the young lady and her duenna.

He only caught a slight glimpse of her countenance as she was wheeled past, but he saw that it bore that weary expression which had already surprised him at the ball-room.

It was one of utter exhaustion and pain.

Then he went home and occupied himself in writing letters to New York.

Long and weary the hours he counted between that and Monday afternoon, when he was to present himself to the beautiful Mexican.

Denby, with all his lightness of manner and affectation, was both noble-hearted and devoted in character.

He felt the deepest interest in his companion.

He knew Charles' father to be very much prejudiced against foreigners as a rule, and he had a vague idea in his own mind that Mexicans were all adventurers.

He was therefore determined to accompany him to the residence of the Spanish-American marquis—determined to exercise his influence on their return to hurry their departure for New York.

Monday at last came, and the two young gentlemen, in formal and perfect morning dress, were ushered into the apartments where the marquis received his *intimes*, as the foreign expression is—that is, a select circle of friends.

A superb suite of apartments, glowing with tropical heat and ablaze with flowers, showed the nationality of the owners.

The marquis was very affable, despite his appearance, which was very much against him.

Having received the young Americans, he turned to welcome others, and Charles at once took the opportunity to cross the room to where Miriam sat, surrounded by a kind of court.

Those nearest to her at once made way for the new arrivals, and Denby was presented to the lovely Mexican by his friend.

He was completely stunned—fascinated at once to the last degree.

As, however, Miriam made way for the older acquaintance, Denby moved away, as did several others, attracted by music or a splendid buffet.

Presently Charles and Miriam found themselves alone.

Silence prevailed for some little time, and then Miriam spoke.

"You appear well acquainted with Rome," she said. "Chalfont tells me you are an assiduous frequenter of the *ateliers*."

"Chalfont exaggerates," he answered. "I have been a regular attendant there since he has been engaged on your portrait."

Miriam started; she looked around in alarm, and then lowered her eyes to the ground.

"You will need go there no more, then," she continued. "It will be packed up to-morrow with all our belongings."

"You leave Rome?" he cried, anxiously.

"Yes, so my guardian has settled it. We depart to-morrow," she added.

"Miss Di Lasso," he said, with a gravity which he found difficult to assume, "I must say I regret it very much. I had hoped we should have become friends."

"I hape no friends," she answered, wearily.

"Your guardian—your family," he urged.

"Mr. Leicester, we are almost strangers; do not let us speak of such things. I understood you would soon leave yourself?"

"I had arranged to depart on Saturday," he responded, "before I saw you."

Now all this was plain enough; but the girl would not see it.

"If you are leaving Rome," she said, "I suppose you are not very particular where you go?"

"It is of little or no moment," he answered, sadly.

"Then perhaps in ten days we may meet in Paris," she answered, prettily; "and now, pray, make way for some one else."

Charles Leicester arose as one in a dream.

He had almost made love to her—had not been rebuked.

No! she bade him meet her in Paris in ten days.

He would be there, no matter what happened.

Satisfied with this victory, he, wishing not to excite any suspicion in the mind of the Mexican marquis, took an early opportunity of retiring, being careful, however, to pay his formal respects to the master of the house, who showed his teeth, smiled, and was very polite.

"*Demonio!*" he muttered to himself, as the other turned his back, "so you have agreed to meet in Paris my turtle doves."

That evening, Charles Leicester, finding even the thoughts of Miriam not enough to make up for her society, proposed to Denby to take a stroll through the streets of Rome.

There is nothing in the world to rival in beauty and charm that city viewed by night.

As Leicester was not disposed on this occasion for society, he avoided those parts of the city where he was likely to meet English and American acquaintances.

He wanted to think, or if he did speak, to do so of the one absorbing subject which engrossed his thoughts.

"It is a great pity," said Denby, philosophically lighting and smoking a cigar, "that when men fall in love, they don't make hermits of themselves."

"Why?" replied Charles Leicester, starting.

"Here have I counted thirty minutes by the clock,"

continued the young man, with imperturbable gravity, "since you have spoken one word."

"I beg your pardon, Denby, but I am a terrible churl," cried Charles, blushing like a young girl. "But I was thinking."

"Of the mysterous maiden?" laughed the young man.

"Yes, I was thinking if really we shall meet again, and whether she will keep her appointment in Paris," gravely answered Charles.

"*Sangue del Christo!*" hissed a voice in his ear. "Take that."

A long glittering blade flashed in the moonlight, and descended with lightning-like rapidity over the young man's shoulder; he fell like a log on the ground, giving utterance to a heavy and startling groan.

"Villain!" gasped Denby, rushing after the retreating form of the assassin, "your life shall pay for this."

A hollow, mocking laugh was the only response, and another groan recalled him to his duty.

Returning to the side of his companion, he stooped and peered into his face.

"Are you much hurt, my poor friend?" he said, in a tender and earnest voice.

A groan was the only reply.

Fortunately at this moment another sightseer of the Colosseum nearly stumbled over them.

"Good Heaven, Chalfont!" said the nobleman, "here is Charles Leicester wounded, I fear, unto death. In the name of God, hurry to the hotel, and fetch assistance, a carriage, a doctor, wraps and brandy."

"Good Heaven!" cried Chalfont, scarcely able to believe his ears. "I suppose that was the assassin that ran against me. But there, I am wasting time."

And he turned away, leaving Denby alone with the unfortunate youth, who was panting for life and weltering in his blood.

He breathed that heavy, stentorous breathing which is as it were the forerunner of death, and though his friend spoke to him in tender and beseeching accents, he answered not a word.

An hour later, he was in his bed at the Hotel D'Ingelterra, very white, very exhausted, but likely to do well except from loss of blood.

He was a month before he was quite recovered, and then he spoke almost for the first time on any but the most ordinary topies.

"I shall start for Paris to-morrow," he said, "I'm a little behind, but no matter."

The next day the two were on their way to Paris, which

they reached at the end of six weeks from the time of the attempted assassination.

Through the Mexican embassy, they easily traced the marquis.

He and his ward had remained four days in Paris and then had taken their departure for Mexico.

"Gone to the other end of the world," said Denby gleefully.

"I shall go after them," was the quiet reply. "I must see her again, and then I must avenge my cowardly attempted assassination."

"How shall you go?" asked Denby, thoughtfully.

"My father has influence; as an attache in all probability," was the answer.

"And I shall go as a simple Nimrod," observed Denby.

"You?" cried the other, quite dazed with surprise.

"Certainly," said his friend, dryly. "What would you do without me?"

And so the matter was settled.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### AT HEAD-QUARTERS.

MEXICO was never a favorite residence for envoys or their subordinates.

What with revolutions, the dangerous character of the traveling, the frequency of assassination and robbery, and many other drawbacks, the republic never was a desirable *habitat* for Americans.

The spirit of enterprise and commerce, however, has peopled it with a very large proportion of foreign merchants, and their presence necessitates that of a certain amount of officials.

Charles Leicester, therefore, when he asked his father to allow him to try his 'prentice diplomatic hand in Mexico, found no difficulty in obtaining the necessary post.

The young man cheerfully accepted what to many was odious exile, and started on his wild love chase.

True to his chivalrous character and to his promise, Denby, whom he called Arthur, accompanied him.

They were each provided with a servant, half valet, half sportsman, as in the pursuit of the *ignis fatuus* which chiefly occupied our young hero's mind, they might have to explore a good bit of very wild country.

It was a brilliant morning in spring that the two friends landed at Vera Cruz and took up their quarters at a celebrated hotel, to repose until the *diligenzia* was ready to transport them to the wonderful capital in the interior of the country.

Charles had quite recovered.

The assassin had touched no vital part, and youth and a good constitution had done the rest.

But there was a marked change in him which could not but be noticed.

There was an aureola of thought upon his brow which singularly added to his manly beauty.

"Here we are at last," said Denby, "in the land of pulque, pronunciamento, jalap, and so forth, to say nothing of the land of beauty."

"We don't see much of it here," observed Charles. "Hot air as from an oven, and sand enough to create a desert."

Such being the case, they remained indoors all day, waiting for the evening to commence their examination of a country which retains most of its old characteristics of the days of Cortez and Montezuma, except that it is not quite so civilized.

The Mexicans are not fond of walking, but in every town there is a sort of promenade lined with refreshment houses, where the fashionables of the city go at dark to sip chocolate, smoke cigarettes, and flirt by means of the fan, an art in which all Mexicans are proficient.

Guided by a *valet de place*, they sought this spot, and having found what they wanted, dismissed their attendant.

Both the young men spoke French, which is understood by the upper classes of Mexico, as of most other countries, while they also knew Spanish.

But as they sauntered along, they conversed in English.

Having for some minutes examined the gay and sprightly scene, they entered a cafe, and selecting a small table and two chairs, seated themselves to sip coffee, smoke, and look on.

As in France, ladies have no hesitation in visiting all such public places.

Their dress, very resplendent, is terminated by a reboso, or scarf, which, cast around the shoulders and head, serves the same purpose as the eastern veil.

As a rule, nothing can be seen of a Mexican lady but her eyes, which she twinkles upon you like a star.

The sight was novel and amusing, and afforded both the young men considerable amusement for some time.

Suddenly, just in front of the cafe, on the pavement, there flitted by two women—one young and graceful, the other older and of inferior rank.

They looked not to the right or the left, but when just upon the table occupied by the young Americans, the younger beauty, whether by accident or design, let fall her reboso, and revealed her face.

Hastily adjusting her scarf, she moved away as if frightened, followed by her attendant.

"Heaven!" gasped Charles; "'tis she."

And before his friend could restrain him, he had darted away in pursuit.

Denby was so taken aback, that, for a moment, he lost his presence of mind, and when he arose, his friend was out of sight.

Still he might have hurried away in time, but that the waiter, with a low, cringing bow, reminded him that he had not paid for his refreshments.

With a mild ejaculation, the young man threw down a dollar, and then followed in the direction his friend had taken.

But neither Charles, the lady, nor her attendant were anywhere to be seen.

Denby was utterly at a loss what to do, but after considerable hesitation thought it best to return to the hotel, and wait the course of events.

It was a long and weary waiting.

Hours passed, and Charles Leicester came not.

Indeed, three hours passed before he came in, weary, sad and dejected.

"My dear fellow," said Denby, "why did you run away and leave me in such a hurry? I have been terrified out of my seven senses."

Charles thought a moment, and then told him exactly what had happened.

He had caught the sight, for one instant, of the beautiful, bewitching face, and knew at once that it must be Miriam, whom chance had so marvelously thrown in his way.

He saw, however, at once, that the lady was trying to avoid him, but he was equally determined not to be driven from his design.

He saw them vaguely before him at no great distance, but, unwilling to excite the attention of the passers-by, did not hurry too fast.

Still he made considerable progress, and presently was within ten paces of them, when they suddenly halted, paused under an archway, and disappeared.

With a great bound of the heart, as if he thought he had lost them, he followed, dashing himself under the sable archway, lighted by a dim lamp, to find himself in a church.

It was a rather gloomy place, lighted up for evening devotions; that is, dimly.

He glanced around for the worshipers, but saw no one,

save some priests and boys, moving with soft steps, like so many ghostly shapes up and down.

Fearing to attract attention, he glided behind a pillar, and peered cautiously into every corner.

Suddenly he saw what he sought.

The young lady and her attendant were kneeling at an altar in the attitude of silent prayer.

There was a row of steps in front of the gorgeous shrine.

No one appeared to take notice of the quiet worshipers.

Charles slipped from pillar to pillar, and was soon beside the young girl.

Having heard that the nights were chilly, he had assumed a cloak.

Without thinking of the danger, or the rather anomalous nature of the proceeding, he knelt down beside the lady.

She never moved, however, or showed any sign of recognition.

Then he stooped close to her ear.

"Will you not speak to me? Say one word," he whispered.

The lady never moved her head, neither bowed nor expressed negation.

"I have come from the other side of the world to seek you," he said, in a reproachful tone.

Speaking under cover of her reboso, the girl now whispered:

"Have you no fear for your life, that you speak to me thus in church?"

Charles drew back abashed, arose, and leaned against a pillar.

Then he heard the two rapidly exchange a few words, and rise without turning their heads.

He at once decided to follow them wherever they went.

They flitted from the sacred edifice, and took another way, as if to avoid the more brilliant part of the town.

They did not run, nor make any effort to escape their patient tormentor.

On the contrary.

They moved slowly and cautiously against the wall, until they entered the Grand Plaza, and halted before what appeared to be a palace.

The young lady turned toward Charles, and wholly concealing her face, said, in a somewhat sarcastic tone:

"I presume, senor caballero, you will now cease your unmanly persecution."

And she pointed to several soldiers lounging about at no great distance.

"I must have a few words of speech with you," he said,

in tones so earnest and heart-rending that the girl stood irresolute.

She whispered something to the duenna, who now spoke.

"My lady thinks you must be mad, but as you seem a gentleman, will give you an opportunity of apologizing and explaining. "Follow me," she said: "but remember you are in a country where stilettos are used at the least provocation."

Charles thought of another country where he had reason to remember the use of daggers.

The duenna opened a side door, revealing a narrow passage lighted by lamps.

Along this the young lady tripped, ascended a few steps, and entered a beautifully-furnished sitting or music room.

There was a harp, a piano, and a couple of Mexican guitars.

The duenna hurried across the room, and fastened the door which communicated with the rest of the palace.

Then the young lady threw off her reboso, turned, and faced the astonished American with a haughty, half-contemptuous glance.

"Now, sir, explain your business. I am in as much danger as yourself," she said; "but I could not make a scandal in the street."

"Not Miriam!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands together. "Oh, lady, what must you think of me?"

No!

Though the likeness was speaking enough for a twin-sister, yet it was not her.

"Miriam!" cried the young lady, her face beaming with a look of surprise and satisfaction. "Surely you are not the Signor Charles Leicester?"

"I am," he answered, still more bewildered than ever. "What does it all mean?"

"Be seated, *caballero*," answered the young lady, kindly. "You must give me time to think. Then you were not killed?" she asked, with a quiet, merry glance.

"I was not," he continued, more and more surprised at every step. "One thing I am certain of. You know Miriam, and can take me to her."

"That I know Miriam Di Lasso is most true," she said, "but as to helping you to see her, that is another question. Do you know, senor stranger, that you are scarcely polite? You do the most daring deed known in Mexico—follow a young unmarried girl home; to speak to her of some other more radiant beauty."

"Ah, lady, I can see you are too good, too radiant, too lovely, to have any such feelings. I have come all the way from New York, for no other purpose than to find

Miriam," he said. "If you really know her, in mercy tell me all!"

"And you really love her so deeply?" she asked, in an arch tone.

"I love her with all my heart and soul, and wish to make her my wife," he said.

"And yet you saw her only once or twice," she continued, thoughtfully.

"I loved her before ever I saw her," he responded, earnestly. "When my eyes fell upon her portrait in the studio of Chalfont, my soul was entranced, and I knew that I had met my fate. I must win her to be my bride, or go wifeless to the grave."

"All the other ladies in existence must be infinitely obliged to you," laughed the girl, sneeringly.

"Perhaps you think us northerners cold. It is not so; but, as a rule, we are constant. That is indeed a vulgar nature which, having once felt real love, can allow the next beautiful girl he sees to charm his eye and steep his senses in a glow. No; the heart, loving once truly, knows no second throb; at least, so I feel," he cried, with a fire and energy that appeared rather theatrical to the impulsive Mexican girl.

"A truce to lectures on love," she said, rather sarcastically; "it is rather dull hearing the praises of another lady. Besides, you forget you are speaking to a young lady of rank, who is supposed to know nothing about love at all, but to be prepared, at the will of a parent or guardian, to wed a man she has never seen or retire to a convent."

This was said with such scorn and defiance as fairly to startle Charles.

"But we are wasting time. I have no hesitation in saying that I knew Miriam, that we have long been friends, but more I cannot say now. I presume you go to Mexico city?"

"I have the honor of being attached to the American Ministry there," he said.

"Then we shall meet. The governor of Vera Cruz, in whose house I am staying, starts immediately for the capital. Give me your exact address, and I promise you shall hear from me and her."

"It is well," he faltered.

The young lady smiled.

"I have no right," she said, "to reveal seerets, but I may say she is not so well as she will be when she knows you have not been assassinated."

At this moment there was a knock at the door.

All arose to their feet.

"Go—go at once!" cried the lady. "Mercia, quick, the door."

"Open, quick, Maria," said a voice, that thrilled to the very heart's core of the young man.

"Lady," he gasped, while the person that called Maria colored up to the eyes; "one moment."

"If you do not retire at once," was the cold and stern response, "I cease to be your friend. Go, as you value my life and yours."

He had no choice, and in two minutes more he stood bewildered and overwhelmed in the open air.

"'Twas her," he said; "I could swear to her voice."

But further delay was useless, and so, finding one of the many idlers who in every Mexican town hang for ever around the corner of the streets, he was speedily guided to his hotel, where Denby waited so anxiously.

"Really, quite an adventure," he said, when Charles had finished his rather prolix narrative; "and you think that your amarato is in the governor's palace?"

"Certain. The moment she spoke, her voice thrilled to the very fibers of my heart," cried Charles, passionately. "Thank Heaven! she will know I am alive."

"And yet you took the other for her?"

"Until she spoke," replied Charles, warmly; "then there was no comparison, though to any one who had not seen Miriam, Maria would be charming to the last degree."

"A spirited young lady," observed Denby.

At this moment a servant of the hotel entered with a small parcel tied around with knotted silk.

He handed it to Charles, who eagerly opened it.

It contained a portrait picture set around with diamonds, and a brief letter.

"Beware. Your path is beset with danger. Those who tried to take your life in Rome will do so here. Better give up the pursuit of one who, no matter what her feelings are, can never be the bride of a brave and good man. Should we meet, do not speak or seem to know me without my permission. Leave Vera Cruz at once, and be very careful of yourself. As soon as your presence is known, look upon your life as in danger every moment.

"Your faithful friend,

"MIRIAM."

"Well," said Denby, as his friend took up the picture and gazed at it with a deep and earnest look.

"I have no secrets from you," answered his friend, and handed him the letter.

"We must hire a band of bravoes," observed the other, dryly; "it appears to me we've come to a queer country."

Then, setting aside all badinage of manner, he conversed seriously with his friend.

As both spoke Spanish and French, it was resolved to assume Mexican disguises, hire good native servants, and travel to Mexico on horseback, instead of by the slow diligenzia.

Should they fall in with the dreaded foe, they might thus discover his machinations.

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## CHAPTER V.

### THE STATE CARRIAGE.

NOTHING was easier than for two young men, well armed and brave, with two servants very much of the same mettle, to find a number of Mexican domestics to act in various capacities.

It must be recollected that on the road to Mexico inns are very scarce, and that travelers ill-provided with provision and such accessories are likely to come off very badly

Acting under the advice of the American Consul, they secured a train of mules to carry their baggage and other articles, four muleteers to manage the animals, and several peons to act in varied capacities.

There was no particular hurry to reach Mexico city, and this feeling influenced Charles Leicester the more that he knew or believed he was leaving Miriam behind.

In his own heart, at once crediting the words of Maria, he felt that he should meet them on the road, hence his readiness to assume the garb of wealthy Mexican travelers.

Charles and Denby traveled slowly, admiring their surroundings, laughing at the many discomforts of the road, and speculating on the future.

Since the romantic adventure of Vera Cruz, and especially since he had examined Miriam's portrait with a critical eye, Denby had felt more interested in the love of his friend.

"A noble brow," he said, "an almost perfect face, and yet how sad the expression. What sorrow can have touched that young life? Is Maria anything like this?"

"Perhaps you may think her more beautiful," observed Charles, with a smile. "She may convince such a confirmed old bachelor even as yourself."

"Heaven!" cried Denby, with a comic horror. "One—ahem; well, one person at a time. I must keep a cool, collected head."

And thus, in bantering and other conversation, they rode

on, in reality deeply intent on the fate which fortune had in store for them in Mexico.

In that country, lawless and priest-ridden, murder is little considered, while it is a common practice to confine refractory heiresses in convents, giving the superior a portion of her fortune to immure her for ever from mortal gaze.

In fact, the fair land of Montezuma is in about the same state as France, Spain and Italy were two hundred years ago.

They had been on their journey five days, and had reached a part of the road where the great forests almost met, leaving only space for the rocky road between.

A comfortable empty hut had offered them accommodation for the night.

Finding that game abounded in the neighborhood, the two young Americans determined to give their mules a rest, and themselves enjoy a day's sport.

They found game even more abundant than they expected, so that, when night came, they were ready to recline under their fig tree and seek repose.

The muleteers, mules and peons had the shelter of a barn, while the masters and their own special servants occupied the hut.

While the evening meal was being cooked, the guns were cleaned and reloaded with that scrupulous exactness which characterizes every true sportsman, and conversation ran upon game.

Suddenly there was a loud cracking of whips at no great distance, and peering out, they saw a carriage with six horses floundering along the road.

It had three postilions and was guarded by some dozen soldiers in yellow uniforms, with long lances, who rode behind.

It was the dusk of the evening.

"Heaven!" said Charles, his heart bounding, "if this be the governor of Vera Cruz on his way to Mexico, as a matter of course the ladies will be with him. What is to be done?"

"Turn out and camp in the forest. I presume a grandee with an escort of soldiers will not be very nice," replied Denby.

At this moment there was a scene of great confusion; the lancers made a rapid retreat, standing aloof in the background, while a band of fierce-looking, truculent men emerged from the woods and surrounded the carriage.

They were the fierce bandits of the forest, against whom these escorts are provided, but which escorts generally vanish until the plundering is over.

"Dogs, leperos, rascals!" said a loud and commanding

voice, "will you not disperse these vagabonds? And you hideous bandits of misfortune, will you dare touch Don Jose De Mendoza and his wards?"

The robbers laughed aloud.

They knew they had nothing to fear from the soldiers, while before the worthy governor could wreak his vengeance, they would be far off.

"Give up your money and jewels, or it will be the worse for you," responded a deep, hoarse voice.

"Follow," said Charles. "We'll settle these vagabonds."

And snatching up their fowling-pieces, the four gallant Americans made a dash at the robbers.

The carriage was close at hand now, and Charles distinctly saw women.

He did not pause to learn if the woman of his love were there or not, but advancing briskly, shot the ruffian dead who held the first horse's head.

Before the bandits, who were twenty in number, could turn and defend themselves, three more were laid low, and then, drawing their pistols and swords, the four Americans formed a barrier between the bandits and the carriage door.

"*Mil demonios!*" roared the chief of the robbers. "Cut the scoundrels down. Don't spare one of them."

A steady volley from the unerring pistols of the Americans was the reply, and then the soldiery, ashamed of their inactivity, dashed up, their lances couched, and made a great show of dispersing the remaining robbers.

The governor of Vera Cruz, a noble-looking man of aristocratic appearance, here alighted, and after severely reprimanding the cowardly escort, turned to those who had really saved them from outrage and insult.

"Hidalgoes, I thank you," he said, in most courteous style. "To you we owe everything. May I ask whom I have the honor to address?"

"Travelers from New York," said Denby, in excellent French. "We thought our poor services were required, and are most happy if they had been of use.

"Of use! Those rascals are worse than useless; but what is to be done? Our horses are too fatigued to go further, and you already occupy the hut."

"Which, with everything in it, is at your service," replied Denby, Charles remaining silent. "We beg to offer its shelter and supper to you and your party."

"If you will join us," continued the polite governor, "we shall be happy; I and the senoritas."

Both the young Americans bowed, and then, as the governor turned to speak to the recreant soldiery, with low bows, helped the ladies to alight.

"Miriam," faintly murmured Charles, as he took her hand, pressed it, and was rewarded by a very gentle pressure in reply.

No other words were spoken until the two ladies and their duennas entered the hut, which had been prepared for the night with a perfect luxury of comforts.

There was supper, and two couches covered by tiger and other skins.

Then the governor entered, followed by his major domo, with wine and some Mexican luxuries from the sumpter mules, and all sat down to supper.

Charles and Denby pronounced their own names in such a way that no Mexican could make them out, while both had, after some minutes, schooled themselves to appear as if neither of them had ever seen the two young ladies before.

Denby was amazed, not only at the great likeness between the girls, but at their great and marvelous beauty.

"These fair maidens," said the gallant old soldier, "are under my charge, and I have therefore to thank you doubly for the valor which drove off the robbers, whom all the saints confound."

"We are only too happy to have been of service," replied Charles, with a quiet, grave look at Miriam.

"The escort shall be punished. Imagine the impudence of the rascals to attack a convoy with a governor in it. These two young ladies, the wards of the Marquis Trejico, are on their way to Mexico, and a pretty booty for a set of unsanctified rascals," he added.

"Sisters, I presume?" said Denby, with a courteous bow.

"Yes," replied the governor, and changed the subject.

Considering the circumstances, and the supposed relation of the parties to one another, the supper was a very merry one.

The gentleman took advantage of the service they had rendered to be familiar with the ladies, and they in the most condescending manner favored their saviors.

"I presume," said Charles Leicester, toward the end of the evening, "you will allow us to travel under your escort!"

The governor laughed aloud.

"Which means that you are gallant enough to offer us your escort. Certainly, with the greatest of pleasure; and now, as we leave at daybreak, we must retire and sleep as best we can."

It had been arranged that the hut should be given up to the ladies, while the young men would sleep in the barn.

The governor had the carriage fitted up as a bed, and very comfortably.

As Charles and Denby walked away, they lit up cigars, and selecting their own corner away from the heavily-sleeping muleteers and peons, sat down.

"I say, Charley, old man," said Denby, "our adventures have begun."

"What do you think of her?" asked Charles.

"Lovely—divine," was the response.

"I say, Arthur, you are not going to be spoony?" observed Charles, pettishly.

"I am not speaking of Miriam, but of Maria. How you can see anything in the other, when that beautiful creature is by, I cannot think."

"I suppose love is blind," mused Charles.

"I should think it was," answered Denby.

It was a bright and beaming morning when Charles Leicester and Arthur Denby left the barn and retired to the woods to make a rough and ready toilet, preparatory to paying their respects to those who were in reality their guests.

Both young men looked radiant as they met the worthy governor of Vera Cruz, Don Jose, and by him were led into the presence of the ladies.

By the aid of the deft Mexican domestics, the cottage had been quite transformed in appearance.

An elegant breakfast was laid out, consisting of chocolate, the national beverage, and other luxuries, and over this the worthy duenna presided, while the young ladies, looking fresh and beautiful, arose to receive their honored guests.

Charles seated himself near Miriam, while Denby did so as naturally near Maria, and the conversation became general, the whole party speaking French.

The young Americans, despite some strong desire to be a little more personal than was wise, were careful not to make any allusions that might argue previous acquaintance.

On this point the wishes of the girls had been so urgent, that any non-compliance with their desires might have seemed wanting in that high-minded and chivalrous pride which is the characteristic of the better class of Americans.

Still, the circumstances under which they were brought together justified a good deal more familiarity than was usual between members of the opposite sex, where the jealousy of the men is even greater than in Spain.

They laughed, talked, spoke of the pleasures and amusements of Mexico city, and the young men were listening

with anxious pleasure to the dulcet tones of the young girls, when a startling interruption occurred.

"Who, Senor Don Jose," said a harsh and sinister voice, "are these strangers whom I find having the assurance to converse thus audaciously with my wards? Surely you are not prisoners of the ladrones?"

It was the Marquis Di Trejico, his teeth more prominent than ever, his yellow complexion more sallow, his little black eyes more savage than usual.

"Marquis," replied the governor, tartly, "these gentlemen not only rescued us from the ladrones, but gave up the house in which we are located. But for them your wards might at this moment be the prisoners of the bandits."

"*Mille gracias!*" cried the Marquis, in a tone that savagely belied his words; "and as I am anxious to reach Mexico, perhaps you will abridge your adieux."

And with a savage, haughty mien, he himself conducted his wards to the carriage, turned his back on the strangers, and left the worthy and good-natured governor to follow as best he might.

"Brute!" muttered Don Jose, as he took leave of our friends. "We part here, caballeros, but when you are in Mexico, make my house your home."

And he turned away to join his surly acquaintance and relative, who had come up with a strong escort of soldiers and peons, who thoroughly surrounded the carriage.

"I wonder," said Charles, as soon as they were alone and had partially recovered their equilibrium, "if the rascal knew us?"

"There was an odd twinkle in his vicious little eyes," replied Denby, "which makes me think we shall be wise to keep out of his way until we appear under the eyes of the American Ministry."

"You are right," observed Charles, in a thoughtful tone. "As I am resolved and determined to make Miriam Di Lasso my wife, I must be cautious. What do you think of her sister, Maria?"

"Well," said Denby, in an unconcerned tone, though the color in his cheek heightened slightly, "I think her a very charming person, for a foreigner."

With which remark the young man arose and proceeded to give his orders for an advance.

The friends could not but feel certain that danger would confront them, but urged on by love and friendship, they resolved to meet it boldly.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A SAGE MENTOR.

As the two young men knew well that the marquis, if he really suspected their identity, would not hesitate to thwart their designs, they came to a very wise resolution.

Instead of remaining behind and risking the ambushes which an unscrupulous adventurer might prepare for them, they determined to pass the slow traveling coach, and reach the capital before the governor, the marquis, and the young ladies.

The guide, a sterling, honest muleteer, when they explained their wishes, at once offered to solve the difficulty.

He was well aware of the stopping places for all travelers, and agreed to slip by the cortege in the night without chance of discovery.

He, however, suggested for this purpose a longer *siesta* than usual, during the heat of the day, which would enable him to carry out his plans.

It was evening when he resumed his journey, and an hour's riding brought them to within a hundred yards of the halting place.

The muleteer went forward and found that the dons were there in a rude inn, the carriages, horses, and soldiers being camped around a barn, with sentries thrown out across the road.

From this cause, no one could go that road undetected, and this was just what the young Americans particularly wished to avoid.

But the muleteer was quite equal to the occasion.

He was well acquainted with every inch of the road.

"You will dismount, caballeros," he said, as he proceeded to muffle the bells of the mules, "and follow me in silence."

Then taking the head mule, very much disconcerted at the want of the usual music, by the bridle, he plunged into what appeared to be a dense and verging forest.

But he knew what he was about.

It was a clear, well defined bridle path, which, at the end of about two hours, brought them out on the road at least four miles ahead of the other party.

At the very same hour, the Marquis Di Trejico was closeted with this man Maffei, his steward, factotum, and faithful henchman.

"You failed me in Rome, bird accursed and of ill omen," said his master; "see that you do it not again. That man," he added, with a concentrated expression of rage, which it

is difficult to render, "is my mortal foe. Some instinct tells me, that living, he will snatch from me the prize that for years I have coveted."

"A poor, insignificant heretic like that?" urged Maffei, with a shrug of the shoulders, which in foreigners expresses so much.

"Ah! my man, you do not know these Americans. This young man saw my ward at Rome," continued the marquis, savagely, "won her favor at first sight, and here he is in Mexico. Why? In pursuit of her, and *demonio!* already he has contrived to find her."

"Senora Miriam Di Lasso is not a person difficult to find," coolly remarked Maffei, as he played with his *machete*, a short sword knife.

"I know it, fellow, and now bandy no words with me. Let the escort know that, once these heretics are the prey of the vulture, there will be a hundred ounces to be divided," hissed the marquis.

"And your humble servant?" asked the other, in an impudent tone.

"Leave your reward to me," said the marquis, "and mind you fail not, or else——"

And a dark, gloomy scowl seemed to intimate that though perhaps he might be generous, yet certainly he could be bitterly revengeful.

Maffei retired, and taking with him some cronies among the escort, kept a good look-out for the Americans and their companions, but not the slightest sign of them was seen.

It was only next evening that, halting at a roadside osteria, they found that their hoped-for victims were a long way ahead on the way to Mexico city.

The marquis made no remark, but redoubled his vigilance, and determined, in the face of what he felt to be a real danger, to carry out at once the nefarious scheme which had for some years been hatching in his mind.

It must be remembered that, under the name of religion and liberty, and with the high sounding appellation of republic, Mexico was a hot-bed of despotism, superstition and ignorance, that long after slavery was abolished by law, it flourished as rank as ever, and that thousands were kept in hopeless bondage, years subsequent to the passing of the laws to free all.

The marquis Di Trejico having the command of almost unlimited money—how acquired no one seemed to know—had immense influence.

He was, it was presumed, invested with legal powers over the two co-heiresses, or he would not so obviously exercise his power.

But in relation to them existed some mystery which none ventured to fathom.

The Marquis Di Trejico was not a person to be questioned, having certain antecedents which were not of a nature to encourage quarreling.

Several persons who had offended him at ball, party, supper or gambling house, mysteriously died, their bodies being found in the streets pierced with dagger wounds.

But no one had ventured in a city where assassination was more common than in Rome some few years ago, to lay any blame upon the superb and haughty marquis.

Having so fortunately foiled, without exactly knowing it, the murderous intentions of their enemy, Charles and Arthur reached Mexico without further adventure, and took up their quarters in excellent apartments, kept, of course, by a Frenchman, and then at once proceeded to pay their respects to the excellent American envoy, whom we shall call Mr. Thompson.

He was delighted at such a pleasing addition to his staff as the son of his old friend, Charles Leicester, and warmly welcomed his friend, or chum, as he called him, Arthur Denby.

"But," said his excellency, a good-humored, keen man of the world, "I must say it puzzles me, what two such young sparks as you can want out in this Heaven-forsaken land. The country is well enough, but what with revolution, rebellions, misgovernment, tyranny, and ignorance, it is the last place I should select to reside in, except as a pure matter of business and duty."

The two young men exchanged an almost imperceptible smile.

But the diplomatist was too quick for them.

"Ha—ha!" he cried; "there is something below the surface. Don't mind me, make a clean breast of it. You will be none the worse for the advice of an old stager."

"Mr. Thompson," replied Charles, frankly, "I have too often heard my father speak of you, not to know your kindness of heart, so, if you will not laugh at me, I will open my heart."

"I will not laugh at you," he answered, with something of a chuckle; "so spin your yarn. You know I have been an old sailor."

Charles began, and not only did the gentleman not laugh, but listened with the utmost attention, nor interrupted once.

"I am sorry," he said, gravely, when the other had finished, "that you should have anything to do with this Marquis Di Trejico, directly or indirectly. He is a man of whom no one speaks ill openly, but shrugs of shoul-

ders, looks, and hints, go a long way. He is a man wholly without principle, of desperate fortunes, living, no one knows how."

"Then how, sir, is he the guardian to these two charming and beautiful girls?" asked Charles.

"Ah, me!" sighed the old bachelor, "so it was and ever will be, I suppose. The young will run after the young and beautiful. Of these ladies I know nothing, except that some vague mystery surrounds them, the nature of which I am unable to fathom."

"They are accomplished, beautiful, rich," urged Charles Leicester.

"Yes—and yet—but I know nothing. Young men, you are not only embarked upon a wild-goose chase, but a very dangerous one. You seem to me wholly to forget the difference of religion."

"I have already heard words from the lips of Miriam Di Lasso," said Charles, firmly, "which lead me to believe that she is not what she seems in that matter."

"Can that be the mystery?" cried Mr. Thompson; "and yet, no. Still it is worth thinking of; in this extraordinary country no avowed heretic can succeed to property where there is a Catholic claimant. I see one thing, to argue with you is useless; but take the advice of one older than yourselves, of a man of experience, whatever it is, you have a dangerous task before you. Your foe is rich, high in rank, unscrupulous. Be on your guard, and never be ashamed to invoke the protection of your country's flag."

Both the young men promised faithfully to trust their master and friend, and the subject dropped.

A week later, being at breakfast, the envoy held up a letter.

"What do you think this huge, official-looking document contains?" he asked, with a grim smile.

"I am not good at guessing," replied Charles.

"Never was," added Denby.

"An invitation to a grand ball given to the Marquis Di Trejico on his return to Mexico. He incloses several cards for my staff and friends. Will you go?"

The young men smiled at the simplicity of the question, and gladly accepted their several cards.

"Of course, the marquis does not suspect," said Mr. Thompson, smiling, "that the sacred portals of the American embassy shelter the persons of his dire foes. Will you take my advice?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Go in uniform; you as an *attache*, Mr. Denby as lieutenant-colonel. In this country embroidery and military

coats go a long way, and besides, they are a protection, when American."

The young men readily agreed, and shortly after retired to compare notes.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE BALL AT THE PALACE TREJICO.

THERE is no time in life so rosy, and yet so full of thorns, as that period when love holds sway over either the masculine or feminine mind, and yet the fruition of hope is either distant or doubtful.

When the course of fancies and affection runs as smoothly as we could wish, when there are no evident stumbling-blocks in the way, even then the heart has its doubts, and the reflection that "there is many a slip between the cup and the lip" intrudes itself upon the jealous affections.

But when love is fierce, ardent, and at the same time almost hopeless, the sting of pain far overpowers all thoughts of pleasure.

Charles Leicester had conceived one of those sudden passions, which, if they were not sublime, would be ludicrous.

These rapid fancies too often fade away, and are looked upon with a smile.

Not so in his case.

Charles Leicester loved deeply, earnestly, in such a way that it was doubtful even if death or the unworthiness of the object would have disheartened him.

The evening of the ball came, and the two young men, after a late dinner, were enjoying the luxury of a cigar on a balcony overlooking, not the street, but the courtyard of the house in which they resided.

"So you really mean to go?" observed Denby, assuming his most drawling tones and most affected manner.

"Of course I do," cried Charles, impetuously. "Do you not?"

"Well, it's a great bore, you know. Imagine dancing on a hot night like this."

"Hot!—why, it is quite cool," said Charles, in a tone of deep vexation. "But what do you mean? If you will not go, you know I cannot."

"There it is, always sacrificing myself on the altar of friendship," drawled Denby.

"You incorrigible humbug!" said Charles. "I do believe you are more eager to go than I am, and only want an excuse."

"No, 'pon honor, Damon and Pythias, and all that sort

of thing," he answered. "But there, if we are going, we must dress."

And rising with an alacrity very much in contradiction with his previous nonchalance, he hurried away, placed himself under the hands of his valet, and was ready a quarter of an hour before his companion.

It would have been difficult to have found two better specimens of the perfect and accomplished American gentleman, than were the young men, when they met and surveyed each other before starting.

Charles, tall, well-made, of well-knit frame, with his wavy chestnut hair, eyes that a woman might have envied, now soft and sweet, then fierce and piercing as a flash of cold steel; Arthur, delicate, of slender proportions, with straight hair, a florid complexion, and girlish, effeminate appearance, had a polished ease about him which had undefinable charms.

Their names were on their cards, and thus armed—each carried a pocket pistol, and short Spanish dagger as well—they were taken to the Trejico palace in a close carriage.

The splendid residence occupied by the marquis was, as usual, gloomy and dark on the side of the square, but the entrance was briliantly illuminated and surrounded by a host of link-bearers, servants, and others that kept up a continual hubbub and tumult.

Passing through all these, the two guests came to a staircase lined on each side by fragrant shrubs, and lit up in gorgeous style.

These they ascended by, in company with other guests, and thus reached the splendid suite of rooms given up to the terpsichorean art.

Their cards were taken and their names shouted out in some incomprehensible style, after which they were free to roam at will.

In a country celebrated for its riches, where at a wedding a bride has walked across the street to church on a row of solid ingots of gold, it may well be imagined that if there was a little show of refinement, there was magnificence and splendor.

Dresses of the gorgeous kind, uniforms blazing with gold and embroidery, silks, satins, pearls, and precious stones dazzled the eye, while there was no want of beauty either on the part of the natives, or of the Spaniards, English and French.

But the two young men, who excited attention rather by the simplicity than by the richness of their dress, had no eyes for ordinary mortals.

They were looking on all sides for Miriam and Maria Di Lasso, the lovely wards of the Marquis di Trejico, when

suddenly, to their surprise and gratification, they saw them standing under a kind of dais going through the form of introduction to several arrivals.

Near them, in conversation, was their excellent friend Mr. Thompson, who seemed upon the most intimate terms, laughing and doing the gallant cavalier like the valiant old bachelor he was.

They rapidly approached.

Both watched the girls keenly, but though they looked at them, neither showed the faintest sign of recognition.

"I can't make it out," said Charles.

"Nor I," said Arthur.

Still, nothing venture, nothing have.

"So you have come at last," cried the minister, in his most jovial tone. "Here come my new staff, my Amadis of Gaul, my Sir Galaor" he added, laughing, "bent, I know, on being introduced to the twin queens of beauty."

"We shall be only too proud," said the young men speaking in one breath.

Both the girls now looked more attentively at them, and then went through the ceremony of introduction as if they had been entire strangers.

Both had blushed a roseate hue as the gallant young Americans stooped and kissed their ungloved hands.

"*Sangue di Christo!*" said a tall, saturnine-looking individual of about twenty-three, in the resplendent, yet tinsel, uniform of a colonel in the Mexican army; "who are those strangers who are making so free with my cousins?"

"Americans," replied the person addressed, "and friends of his Excellency Thompson. You can see by their uniform, belonging to the embassy."

The second speaker was the marquis, who, accompanied by his son, was about to secure the hands of the heiresses for a brilliant quadrille which was about to commence.

Too late!

Acting in his official capacity, and presuming somewhat on his age and station, Mr. Thompson had proposed that the "two handsomest couples" in the room should commence the quadrille, and as the music struck up, the marquis and the colonel had to stand on one side as the girls passed them closely, leaning on the arms of the two young gentlemen in uniform.

A terrific execration escaped the lips of the marquis as they passed.

"What is the matter, father mine?" asked the saturnine and yellow-looking colonel. "You seem to have trod on a scorpion."

"*Mil demonios!*" hissed the marquis, livid with rage,

his teeth chattering with excess of rage. "By all the fiends of the lower regions, 'tis they again. May I ask, Senor Thompson," he added, toning down his passionate voice, "if you know the two caballeros who have just made so free with my wards?"

"They are American gentlemen," said the bluff old sailor; "my friends, and one is my attache. Both are specially under my guardianship."

"Many thanks to your excellency. I only wanted to know if they were fit and proper persons to associate with my wards and nieces," replied the master of the house, and drew his son away to a dark corner where they could see without being seen, and speak without being overheard.

"What ails you?" asked Count Luis, bluntly. "Again, have you been bitten?"

"You recollect the two young men I spoke of?" responded his father.

"Yes."

"You behold them. The fellow I thought I had got rid of in Rome, who made an appointment with Miriam. See," he added, in a choked voice, "how she hangs on his arm, looks up with innocent abandon into his eyes, smiles celestially at his words, harkens to his voice as if it were the sweet music of the spheres."

"Rather unpleasant for one who loves so deeply and so hopelessly as you do," sneered Count Luis.

"Spare your sarcasms, boy," was the cold and savage reply. "Did Maria glance, ever laugh, like that to you?" he added, as he slightly indicated, by a motion of his hand, where Denby and Maria were approaching.

Count Luis looked and saw enough to drive one of his jealous disposition half mad.

Maria De Floria Di Lasso, who was by nature of a more merry and light-hearted disposition than her sister, approached, leaning on the arm of the young officer.

She was dressed in some rich material that partially revealed her budding charms.

She wore a wreath of beautiful flowers, and from underneath the flimsy veil, which this supported, the laughing black eyes were flashing, while from her lips floated a ripple of merry laughter, at some speech from the young American.

"I do believe, in all sober sadness," she said, in tones that thrilled to the very heart of the jealous count, "that you northerners are greater adepts in the art of flattery than even our southern youths. Why travel so far to tell such absurd falsehoods in a woman's ear? Could you not find one credulous enough at home?"

"I never tried," replied Denby, with an earnest simplicity which was almost comical. "I never flatter, and you are the first of your sex who ever roused me into paying a compliment as deserved as it is truthful."

And they passed on, light hearted, and to all appearances very happy.

"Already," said the Count Luis; "why, *demonio*, I could never get a smile, much less a laugh from my demure cousin. What can it all mean?"

"It means that we must shilly shally no longer," said the marquis, in a hoarse tone. "This very night shall those rebels be taught who are their masters. Do you know if Father Joseph can be found, and the writer, Andreas?"

"Certainly," answered Count Luis; "but those insolent foreigners?"

"Had better be left alone," moodily responded the marquis. "The arm of America is uncommonly long, and that pragmatical fool, Mr. Thompson, gave me a hint that those insolent boys were friends of his."

"Curse them!"

"To my heart's content," continued the marquis, "but now dissemble; mingle with the throng, and above all, do nothing to arouse any suspicion in the minds of the girls."

With a muttered curse upon all procrastination, the young man yielded, and when, from the exigencies of etiquette, the young Americans were compelled to give up the society of their partners, he advanced and secured the hand of Maria for a dance.

The gloom which settled on her face, the cold, trite answers she gave him, and the utter cold nonchalance with which she danced, were daggers to his heart.

"How different," he said, bitterly, "you are with me to what you were just now with that foolish young American."

"He is a good dancer and a courteous gentleman," she replied, as she disengaged her arm from his, and coldly bowing, went to rejoin her sister.

If looks could have slain, then the girl would have died on the spot, for never did menacing scowl more concentrated and hateful fall from the brow of man.

He could contain his passion no longer, so beat a hasty retreat; nor returned to the ball-room until just as the company was dispersing at an early hour in the morning.

Miriam and Maria, who, though very much pleased with certain incidents of the evening, were anxious, having seen the last guest depart, retreated to a sitting-room where they could compare notes.

They were by no means tired, and the expected refresh-

ment of a cup of chocolate was exceedingly welcome in prospect.

"I have had a long and happy evening," said Miriam, warmly, and then she added, with a sigh: "How will it end?"

"I really don't know," replied Maria. "Heigho! these Americans are very enterprising. This friend of your friend said more to me than a Mexican would dare on a year's acquaintance."

"Well," said Miriam, "I must own that the young gentlemen are rather forward, but alas! must we not end this folly? I love this fair foreigner, this brave and handsome son of Columbia, and yet, what avails it?"

"Much," answered Maria, warmly. "If they prove worthy of us, what is there to prevent us marrying them?"

"Us!" cried Miriam. "Marrying them? Are you, too, affected?"

"I didn't say that," replied the honest girl, with a roseate blush; "but if this young American means all he says, I am afraid I shall not have the heart to be cruel."

And she laughed so heartily, so merrily, so innocently, it was a pleasure to hear her.

"My dear Maria," said her graver and more thoughtful sister, "I do believe these young men to be worthy of our affection; but for all that, how can we marry them? If we were wholly free, instead of the slaves of this man," she added, bitterly, "could we? Do you forget all?"

"I forget everything," replied Maria, rousing herself, with all the ardor of her somewhat tropical nature, "except that I love."

"Whom?" said the bitter and caustic voice of Count Luis.

He and his father stood before them.

"Why at such an hour an invasion of our privacy?" asked Miriam, haughtily, rising to her feet.

"A truce to heroics," said the marquis, with a sneer; "we have seen and heard enough to-night. Your brazenly impudent conduct with these two heretic foreigners has not passed unnoticed, and I have determined to end such unmaidenly conduct. I intend to place it out of your power to flirt with such *leperos* again."

"How?" asked Miriam, caustically.

"By wedding you to those to whom you have been promised for years," he answered; "prepare yourselves. In one hour you will be my wife, while Maria, here, will be the slave of my son."

"Never!" was the response; "better death than such foul contamination."

The two men drew back with an angry start, a dark and menacing frown on their hard and saturnine faces.

"Before the day dawns," retorted the marquis, "Father Joseph will be here with the writer Andreas. You know that resistance will be useless, so, prepare yourselves for that which is inevitable. You never leave this room alive except as the brides of the Marquis Trejico, and the Count Luis, his son."

"Before you retire," said Miriam, scornfully, "will you order our maids to bring us our chocolate, for which we have been waiting this half-hour?"

"Certainly," replied the marquis, who thought them completely cowed.

As soon as their backs were turned, Miriam turned to Maria.

"We have one only hope," she said, as she hurriedly wrote a note, "unless, indeed, this letter reaches its destination in time."

And she hurriedly wrote a few lines and addressed them, tying the letter with a colored ribbon, and fastening it with wax.

Scarcely had she finished, when one of the duennas and two maids entered with the varied apparatus necessary for the making of good chocolate.

While the domestics were occupied, Miriam drew the duenna aside.

"Garcia," she said, "I am in great peril. On your soul, by the religion you believe in, I beg you to do what you can to save me. Nothing can do it but the delivery of this letter."

And she read out the name and address.

The duenna heard her with simple awe, not unmingled with a gleam of satisfaction.

"I will carry the letter myself and deliver it into his own hands. He has been up, this hour, the holy man," she said.

And when the chocolate was ready, she retired with the attendants.

"And now, Maria, as you love yourself and me, have courage. Observe all I do or say, and hold out; nothing else can save us," she earnestly added,

"I will do all things that you do," replied Maria, who had great confidence in her sister.

They calmly took their chocolate, and when the hour had expired, calmly waited the crisis of their fate.

A clock struck twenty-two, equivalent to our six o'clock in the morning.

At this precise moment the marquis and count, with

Maffei and another confederate servant, entered, followed by the writer Andreas and the priest, Father Joseph.

The writer, who had several documents in his hand, seated himself at a table and began to read out what purported to be two brief marriage contracts.

"You are wasting your time," said Miriam; "we refuse to be married, and appeal to you, as the representative of the law of the land, to do your duty."

"He knows his duty too well to listen to the vagaries of two foolish girls," interrupted the marquis, sternly. "Father Joseph, commence."

The priest opened his book.

"Father Joseph, on the peril of your soul, pause," said Miriam, solemnly. "I and my sister are heretics."

The priest dropped his book and crossed himself.

"A wicked lie!" screamed the marquis, "invented to deceive you. They have ever been of the true church, and have never departed from it. Do not mind the silly subterfuge. It is a mere trick to defeat my views."

The priest at once recovered his presence of mind, picked up the book, and proceeded to mumble over some words in Latin, which to the girls had really no meaning.

"Once for all," said Miriam, in an earnest and solemn tone, "I warn you to desist. If you lend yourself to the base uses of this man, who has no claim on our affection or duty, I will expose your nefarious deed on the housetops; I will proclaim your guilt in the market-place."

"I will see that you are held harmless," cried the marquis. "Proceed."

"Aye, proceed!" said the count.

Miriam and Maria drew back and turned away.

"'Tis a vain, idle and wicked ceremony," cried the former, "and will bring infamy on all concerned in it."

But the priest again commenced, the men advancing, and by sheer physical force holding the hands of their unfortunate victims.

With a look of bitter scorn on their faces, the girls tried to wrench themselves away.

At this moment the door of the chamber opened, and a soft but commanding voice spoke:

"What means this sacrilege?"

The three men stood aghast, for there, in full canonicals, stood the Archbishop of Mexico, a stern but good man, to whom the girls had sent a petition for assistance.

The miserable priest fell on his knees, and began to implore pardon in the most abject of tones.

"You are suspended until further orders," said the bishop; "and you, rash men, shall be dealt with by the proper authorities. Let the girls," he added, to some one

outside, "be taken to the Benedictine convent; the Lady Superior Anna will answer for them."

And two sisters of charity, advancing to where they stood, led the unresisting young ladies out of the room.

"By what authority," began the Marquis Di Trejico, in a blustering tone, "does your reverence interfere in my affairs?"

"By the right which every man possesses to protect innocence and virtue from villainy and oppression," replied the archbishop.

And without another word, he strode out, leaving the marquis and his son overwhelmed with rage and mortification.

"Do you mean to succumb to this insolent churchman?" asked the count.

"No; but we must be wary and cautious. You know how powerful he is," answered the marquis, somberly.

"But how release them from the convent?" continued the count.

"I will soon see to that," replied his father, with a sinister smile; and then he unfolded his plans, which, while exciting the astonishment of the other, also met with his perfect approval.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### A FOUL DEED.

THE marquis and his son, as soon as they recovered from the sudden blow inflicted on them by the startling and unexpected appearance of the archbishop, and his removal of their intended victims to the charge of mother church, began to reflect deeply on the situation.

There is no country in the world where the church has more power than Mexico.

It is richly endowed, it owns real estates, and wields its thunderbolts without stint or fear.

Openly to oppose the church would have been madness, and this they knew well, but money and chicanery go a great way in a country so ignorant and benighted.

As guardian of the girls, the marquis could have invoked the protection of the law; but there was a secret in the history of the nobleman and the girls, which rendered any appeal to the law on his part undesirable.

There is said to be a skeleton in every household, which every now and then starts into being.

Few suspected the terrible nature of the one which made the life of the marquis, despite his apparent rank and wealth, a burden to him.

They, therefore, determined to act with great circum-

spection and care, and try to put off all suspicion from themselves, and fix it upon others.

The day after the events recorded in our last chapter, Charles Leicester and Denby called upon the marquis.

With fury in his heart, and a smile on his lips, the marquis received them.

After some ordinary conversation having no particular interest for any one, Charles came to the point.

"Shall we have the pleasure of paying our respects to the young ladies?" he asked.

The marquis looked pained and hurt on hearing the question.

"I am sorry to say that the two misguided girls have removed themselves from our guardianship," he said, with a sigh.

"Left you!" cried Charles.

The young man's tones and looks expressed the utmost surprise.

"Yes; and we have no clew to their whereabouts, except that they have secreted themselves in one of the many convents of our city."

"Is not this very sudden and unexpected?" asked Charles.

"Very much so," replied the Marquis; "but doubtless they have been acting under foolish advice."

The young Americans arose, and bowing, retired.

They were not in the mood for further conversation with these men, whom they believed to conceal something sinister under their affectation of blandness and candor.

"What is your opinion, Denby?" asked Leicester, as soon as they were beyond reach of the other's ears.

"That there is a considerable screw loose somewhere," said Denby. "I don't like the looks of those two fellows."

"What is to be done?" asked Charles, who was very much excited.

Each day his warm and earnest passion for Miriam increased, each hour she became dearer and dearer to him.

"I scarcely know what to advise. If the young ladies have taken refuge in a convent, it must be because they have been subjected to some coercion or ill-treatment," mused Denby. "I should like to cut the count's ears off."

"Perhaps they have had them moved somewhere out of our reach," continued Charles; "at all events we must devote ourselves to a search. In the interest of humanity, apart from our private feelings, we are called on to seek for them."

"In the interest of humanity, of course," said Denby.

Without much further conversation they returned to their own residence, and after some little time sent for the landlord, a podgy, good-humored little Frenchman.

"I am about, sir," said Charles, speaking in his softest and most diplomatic tones, and addressing the other in French, "to give you a great proof of confidence."

"It will not be wrongly placed, monsieur," said Jules Dubois, placing his hand upon his chest and bowing profoundly.

"Sit down, Monsieur Dubois; half confidences are of no use. We must tell you everything," remarked Charles.

The man was noted for his honesty, and his hotel was looked upon as the best in all Mexico city.

Charles told the whole story.

The Frenchman brightened up.

It was a matter of great importance, and moreover, it was a love case, and what Frenchman does not sympathize with anything connected, however remotely, with the woes of the heart?

"In what way can I serve you?" he asked.

"I suppose, residing here so long as you have done," said Charles, "you will be able to advise us. We wish the services of a trusty and clever detective."

"Humph!" mused M. Dubois, "you must not look for such a one among the yellows."

"But why?"

"They are dishonest. They stick together. You are what they call here iss. They would take your money and betray you," he replied. "But there is at the French embassy a *garcon* just your style. He knows everything, and though he is a courier now, he has been in the police."

"An honest, trustworthy man?" asked Charles Leicester.

"True as steel. He is your man."

"When will you introduce him?" the other continued.

"To-night; at six o'clock he is done with his business, and comes to play dominoes and smoke his trabuco here," replied Dubois.

"We will see him at eight," continued Charles, "we have business at the embassy at six."

And so it was settled.

A long and wearisome day was that day for Charles and Denby.

Little as they knew of the girls, they had wound themselves around their hearts in a marvelous way.

They were so pure and innocent, so elevated in character, so far superior to the ordinary run of girls.

Well, perhaps they were not so; but to them the sweet dream, the soft delusion was the same.

If we do not think the girl we love far beyond any other sex, what would love be?

When we see with the eyes of passion the tint is wonderfully beautiful.

What had happened to them?

Into what pitfall had they fallen?

They had an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Thompson, and told him all.

"Convents," he said, dryly; "don't you have anything to do with convents—anything but that. The power of the church is something wonderful."

"But if we trace them to any of these retreats, will you not help us with the archbishop?" asked Charles, eagerly.

"My boy, you are treading upon dangerous ground. You are heretics, without the pale of the church. The archbishop is a very good man, but then, you see, he will not help you to carry off two Roman Catholic heiresses."

"They are not Catholics," replied Charles.

The minister gave a start.

"My friends," he said, gravely, "beware what you do. As defaulters from their own church, they may be punished, and your pursuit will only injure them. You must be cautious, very cautious. I can defend you from open foes; but in the land of stillettos, you know not what may happen at any moment."

As the envoy was very stern and serious, they urged him no longer, but left him immediately after dinner to go to the meeting with the detective.

Theodore Delcroix, the honest ex-police agent, now courier to the French embassy, was a little man with a knotty countenance, thin, with ferrety eyes, and sharpness to be read in every feature; but the whole was concealed under a mask of *bonhomie* that deceived all but the initiated.

He was introduced by Dubois, and left then to his own devices.

"You are aware, sir," said Theodore, gravely, when the other had finished, "that the Marquis Trejico does not bear the best of characters."

"In what way?"

"He is a gambler—that, in Mexico, is nothing; he is a *roue*—most men of means are; and he has an unpleasant way of putting his adversaries out of his way," he answered.

"The pay shall be in proportion to the risk," said Charles, with something like a sneer.

"I am not speaking for myself," mildly responded the Frenchman. "I shall work in a way not to compromise myself; but if he finds you are moving, look out. In Mexico city there are hundreds who would poniard you for a dollar."

"We will keep on our guard," remarked Charles.

"Your first desire is to know if two young ladies answering the description you have given me, have been removed to any convent?" asked Theodore Delcroix.

"Exactly."

"I don't think that will be difficult," he observed; "our chaplain is on good terms with a certain father, who, it seems to me, knows everything, and these being ladies of rank and fashion, he will know."

"Probably," said Charles, putting a purse of Mexican dollars on the table; "spare no expense, and above all, be secret."

The Frenchman smiled and bowed low as he took his leave.

It was twelve o'clock, just as the young men were taking their last cigar, that a note was put in the hands of Charles.

"The young ladies were removed at daybreak yesterday to the convent of the Benedictine Ladies, by order of the Archbishop of Mexico."

"What can this mean?" asked Charles, in a wildly anxious tone.

"Rather mysterious, I must say," observed Denby, "and I do not see exactly what is to be done."

"We must apply for permission to see them," said Charles, "and then ascertain their own wishes."

This was very easy to say, but both asked themselves in their own mind if, in that extraordinary country, they would be able to.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE DETECTIVE AT WORK.

WHAT the real religious opinions of an ex-police agent of the Rue de Jerusalem in Paris may have been it would have been hard work to say.

It is sufficient for our purpose that he was on very friendly terms with the chaplain and confessor of the embassy, one of those jovial-hearted men who seem born to enjoy themselves.

The man stoutly did his duty, and then believed himself free to amuse himself.

He would remove most traces of his clerical habiliments, and adjourn to a favorite *cafe*, where he could play a game, smoke his pipe, and enjoy his mild Bordeaux without fear of interruption.

In a country where priests go to the theater and openly play in gambling houses, he need have shown no modesty in the matter, but he did.

Still more jovial and rather more inclined to the strong brandy of the country was Father Joseph, and these two

having knocked up a friendship, were in the habit of meeting every evening at a quiet coffee-house, frequented by Theodore and others belonging to the embassy.

Theodore was always the life and soul of the party, and very free with his money.

He entered gayly on this occasion, and saluting the priests, sat down near them.

He joined in the conversation, laughed, joked, and finally played a game or two.

"Have you heard," he said, suddenly, in a low tone, "the very serious and dreadful news?"

"No," cried the chaplain, startled by his sad mien; "what is it?"

"The two wards of the celebrated Marquis of Trejico have eloped with some heretic lovers. Their fortunes and everything are lost to the church," he continued, shaking his head.

"Dreadful," said the chaplain, with a look of genuine and pious horror. "How can it have happened?"

"I have no particulars," responded Theodore, who had seen a sudden gleam in the countenance of Father Joseph; "but I had hoped you would be able to say it was not true."

"This is the first I have heard of it! As you say, it is very sad; but what can you expect when heretics are received with such favor?" replied the chaplain, going on with his game at the same time.

"Set your mind at ease," whispered Father Joseph, in a low tone; "the young ladies are quite safe. I saw them carried off yesterday morning to the convent of the Benedictines. The whole thing is a false rumor."

Both the chaplain and the courier expressed their satisfaction at this information, and the subject was dropped.

Shortly after Theodore retired, and sent his laconic missive to his employer.

Early next morning he was required at the embassy, he hurried around, and as he expected, found the young Americans up.

Without hesitation or disguise, he explained how he had made his discovery.

They thanked him heartily, and bade him keep on *qui vive.*

They were now in possession of one important fact.

They knew where the two young ladies were immured, but it still remained a question as to why they had been placed in a convent.

This they could not for the life of them explain.

It did not appear likely that the marquis would willingly part with his wards, while, knowing their private views,

it appeared impossible that the girls had voluntarily immured themselves within convent walls.

"I should like to get hold of that Father Joseph," mused Charles.

"To what end? He naturally enough healed the tender-hearted conscience of our friend Theodore," said Denby; "but he would tell us nothing."

"These fellows are very badly paid," urged Charles; "do you not think that they have their price?"

"Good job I thought of securing a good banking account," observed his friend with a smile.

"Yes; now, suppose we try the archbishop?' continued Charles.

"No harm in trying," said Denby, dryly.

A letter was accordingly written, and then both the young gentlemen drove to the archiepiscopal palace.

The letter was placed in the hands of a kind of secretary, and then they were ushered into a large waiting room.

In less than ten minutes the secretary returned and bade them follow him to the presence of the distinguished prelate.

He received them with marked courtesy, and waving all ceremony, at once asked in what way he could oblige them.

"Your highness," said Charles, speaking with that quick eloquence of the heart which lowers all obstacles, "doubtless you will frown at our seeming impertinence, and laugh at the motive which impels us."

"I never laugh at anybody," replied the priest, mildly; "speak."

"We are Protestants, of a different form of Christianity to what you teach, and yet we come with confidence to you to ask your advice and counsel," cried Charles.

There was a tremor in the old man's lips, a quiver on his face, nothing more.

"I love a beautiful and charming girl; I wish to make her my wife," urged Charles.

"Well," said the priest, now speaking with studied coolness.

"This young lady is Miriam Di Lasso, ward of the Marquis Di Trejico," continued the attache; "we called yesterday to see them, and were told they had left the charge. We happened to know that they are in the convent of the Benedictine Ladies, under your jurisdiction."

The swarthy face of the Mexican priest then became crimson.

"How could you have known this?" he began, and then

added: "it matters little, however. You know where they are—what then?"

"We wish to have free access there, to see them, to learn their wishes," cried Charles.

"Young men," said the prelate, after a slight moment of reflection, "you are rash, impetuous, and thoughtless; but you are young. My advice to you would be, leave the country; you are entering on a foolish and perilous enterprise, which may end badly."

"We will brave everything for those we love!" cried Charles.

"Hush! talk not to me of such mundane passions," said the priest, whose haggard eyes and features seemed to indicate long struggles with nature and passion. "You will not take my advice; I knew it. You shall have permission to see these girls, in the presence of the superior."

"Many thanks, your eminence!" both cried.

And led away by their enthusiasm, they each caught a hand and kissed it.

The old man smiled.

His was a noble mind and good heart, warped only by circumstances over which he had no control.

He then went to his desk and wrote a brief and imperative missive.

He let them read it.

They were to have an hour's unreserved communication with the two senoritas, Miriam and Maria Di Lasso, the superior only to be present.

Then the young men retired, and hurried off to the convent, which was at no great distance.

They might have been surprised to see what the archbishop did.

Going to the back of his room, he pressed a panel, which opened upon a long, narrow passage, at the end of which was a heavy iron door.

Here he rang a bell, and soon, after some little parley, was admitted to the convent of the Benedictine ladies, of which he was the chaplain and father confessor.

He rapidly reached the superior's room, and after a short conversation with a stout but ascetic-looking old lady, returned to his own palace.

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## CHAPTER X.

### AN INTERVIEW AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

THE two young men soon alighted at the door of the convent, and passing through the crowd of beggars and other applicants, entered the open court, beyond which the or-

dinary class of visitors are not admitted, and rang the bell.

A female portress came to a small trap and surveyed the visitors.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she said stiffly, as she became aware of the presence of two handsome young men.

"Two gentlemen, with a letter from his eminence the archbishop," replied Charles.

The door opened like magic, the woman took the letter, and bidding them be seated, turned away to deliver the important missive.

She did not return at once, but when she did, was very respectful, as she bade them follow to the parlor.

It was a handsome room, furnished, however, in a severe style, in which sat the superior alone.

She motioned them to a seat without rising, and looked at them with anything but a favorable eye.

"You have orders," she began, tapping her left hand with the bishop's letter and with a fan, "to see two young ladies under my especial charge. May I ask your motives?"

"We explained them fully to the archbishop," said Charles Leicester, who did not like her stern and caustic manner.

"Enough," she continued, tartly; "his orders shall be obeyed."

And she rang a bell, gave some orders, and in a few minutes Miriam and Maria appeared.

Their heads were bowed, and it was almost a cry of terror they uttered when they recognized their visitors.

They glanced meaningly at the superior, and then held out their hands.

"Why are you here?" asked Miriam, coldly. "This is no place for you."

"We heard you were relegated to this convent, and came to inquire if you had been brought against your consent," continued Charles.

"We came here at our own request and desire," said Miriam, looking the young gentleman full in the face, "to escape dire persecution, a fate worse than death."

"By your own consent?" faltered Charles, while Denby looked utterly confused and confounded.

"Yes; and the best thing that can happen to us just now is to remain here," began Miriam.

"But you——" he interrupted.

His back was turned to the lady superior, and he intercepted her view.

Miriam, with a terror-stricken face, put her finger on her lips.

Evidently she was warning him to be cautious.

Charles changed the subject to the question of their general health, and desired to know when they could pay another visit.

"The same day, the same hour, once a week," said the superioress.

As nothing could be got further by delay, and to sit there with bursting hearts was out of the question, the young men arose, and offered their hands to the young ladies.

Charles felt a little packet rest in his, and at once secured it.

The head sister watched them with a supercilious smile, and yet that woman had taken the vows because the man she loved had married for money.

The two young men thanked the superioress and went out.

It was only when in the carriage Charles eagerly opened the letter.

"I have only time to say that you had better give up all thought of us. We have escaped a dire destiny, only to fall into one nearly as bad. We are too rich for the church to part with us; we shall never leave this convent except as the wives of Catholics—that or the veil.

"MIRIAM AND MARIA."

They gazed wildly at the letter.

Could such a thing be?

"Surely that noble old man was not deceiving us," cried Charles.

"There is something wrong somewhere," said Denby. "We must carry them off."

"From that dreadful prison?" replied Charles.

"Such things have been done," responded Denby. "We must consult our French friend."

At the request of the landlord, Theodore came around again, and a further conference was held.

"The only one thing to be said is," he remarked, coolly, "they are not nuns. In this country sacrilege is punished with awful severity. But I don't see my way."

"Five thousand dollars," said Charles, who had previously consulted with his friend, "if you bring about their release and escape from this country."

The Frenchman started.

He had saved money during his checkered career, but five-and-twenty thousand francs was a sum which almost took away his breath.

It would enable him to retire on his small property near Marseilles, and do no work for the rest of his life.

"You are generous, gentlemen," he said, warmly, "and I will do much to serve you. I must reconnoiter."

"Would money to buy assistance help you?" said Charles.

"I do not know. There is one priest I am sure could be bought for a *chanson*—a song, as you say; but when he is bought, can he be trusted?" he mused. "Never mind, I will reflect on the matter and see what can be done."

And after one or two more words the plucky little Frenchman retired to plot an undertaking which if unsuccessful, might cost him his life.

"This is getting very exciting," said Denby, as he sank back in his chair, and began puffing away at a cigar.

"But is your heart in it?" asked Charles, anxiously.

"Yes," replied Denby, with unusual gravity of manner. "Ever since I saw them in that terrible room, like two caged birds, my heart aches. Poor girls!"

"They are wretched, no doubt, and cannot speak frankly," mused Charles. "I fancy what they feared was any allusion to their recent apostacy."

"That is it. Anything else might be forgiven," cried Denby, warmly; "the sooner we get them out the better."

"And then?"

"Why, we must marry and run away. The chaplain will do all that sort of thing, and law will strip their guardian of his usurped rights!" exclaimed Denby.

"I would only too gladly release them, without one thought of their fortunes," said Charles.

"Of course; but the rascal shall not triumph. Besides, for the sake of our friends in New York, we must not take penniless brides."

"Heaven grant we win them at all," said Charles, anxiously.

"Amen," replied Denby.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### THE COUNTERPLOT.

MEANWHILE, neither the marquis nor the count had been idle.

After some thought they had made up their minds to a scheme which would have amazed their American rivals.

That very evening the two were seated in company with Father Joseph.

This individual was of evil repute enough, and having

fallen under the displeasure of the archbishop, would be only too glad to leave the city of Mexico.

He therefore agreed, for a liberal sum of money, to aid them in an enterprise, for a man in his position truly nefarious.

Nothing less than to assist in a forcible abduction from the convent.

The city of Mexico, after eight o'clock in the evening, is abandoned to thieves and other bad characters.

No others venture out, except in carriages or with an escort.

Bold and audacious enterprises are therefore not impossible.

Father Joseph had agreed to obtain admission into the convent, if the others took all other responsibility.

As the father and son were desperate, there was no desperate remedy they were not ready to resort to.

They rightly judged that the whole influence of the American embassy, and Mexico was anxious just then to be in favor with America, would be brought to bear to release the two girls and have them handed over to those who wished to make them their wives.

There were secrets in the lives of the marquis and viscount which rendered it extremely unadvisable that their conduct should reach a court of law.

The eminent prelate who ruled in Mexico was a man so well known for his justice and piety that they had little to expect from him.

He might do all in his power, honestly and fairly, to keep the girls within the pale of the church, but if they insisted on their undoubted right of selection, he would not make himself a tyrant.

Those who departed from the church of their ancestors were few in that land, but were under the protection of the Protestant powers.

In every way there was no time to lose.

After an interview with Maffei, their course of action was decided on.

In Mexco city there is a large population very much resembling that of Naples, who live no one knows how or on what.

They are simply vagrants, who, so long as they can get a bare supply of food and drink, and a few coppers to gamble with, are perfectly satisfied.

Work is one of those things which they despise.

How, then, do they live?

By petty larceny, by crime of a more or less heinous kind.

This population, which is only occasionally seen in the

daytime, is in its glory at night, when it turns out in great force.

"You are sure," said the marquis, when he had elaborated his nefarious plot with Maffei, "that you can collect together enough men who can be trusted?"

"Si, senor," grinned Maffei; "I could find fifty who would kill your excellency for a dollar."

"I am aware of it," dryly replied the marquis, gravely; "but sacrilege is infinitely worse than murder!"

"I am aware of it, so these gentry may probably require double pay," continued Maffei; "only leave everything to me."

"I know I can trust you," said the marquis, "so shall leave everything in your hands."

"Then if your excellency will be at the Rio Alta at eleven, all shall be ready," observed Maffei, and retired.

"We are risking our heads," said the son, when alone with his father.

"I tell you," replied the marquis, "that things are coming to a head. Unless we can secure the persons of the girls, we are ruined—utterly ruined. They can easily explain all when once they are free."

"Have we not the estates, and have we not a hostage?" replied his son.

"Yes, we have the estates, but if these girls find powerful friends," he went on, "how long shall we be able to say so? We are safe only while they are in our possession."

'You intend, then, leaving Mexico?" his son asked, in rather a gloomy tone.

"Yes; once at the Aranja, in the midst of our own people, what can they do? All around are our dependents and friends," mused the marquis. "Leave the rest to me."

They now dropped the subject and went out to show themselves among their friends, in order to be ready with an *alibi* in case of necessity.

It was at eleven at night that the two men sallied forth from their residence, disguised in cloaks and slouched hats.

They were mounted on horseback, and followed by six men, also mounted and well armed.

The streets were silent and abandoned.

No one except the police and those who had nothing to lose ever ventured away from the center of the town at that hour.

The police were usually in the guard houses, the riff-raff in their wine shops.

No one took notice of the cavalcade as it passed.

When close to the Rio Alto, the marquis and count dis-

mounted and sent their horses to a point of the road beyond the Benedictine convent, leading to Sonora.

Then they entered the house designated to them by Maffei.

It was a common drinking and gambling shop, frequented by the refuse of the city, men to whom the use of the knife was familiar, and every one of whom was under the ban of the police.

It is needless to say that their scowling ugliness equaled their ferocity.

Except in a few instances, the criminal class have a physiognomy of their own.

They looked about them rather uneasily, not seeing Maffei.

But that worthy put his head out of a doorway and beckoned them to enter.

They obeyed, and found about a dozen of the most villainous of the whole gang congregated around a table, drinking and playing faro.

At the sight of the two caballeros they arose and saluted.

"This gentleman," said Maffei, pointing out the marquis, "is your employer, and requests me to hand you this bag of money."

And he placed it on the table, emptying it as he did so.

A gleam of satisfaction, of gratified avarice, gleamed on every countenance.

"When your task is finished, you are to have double," he added.

A warm cheer was the response, and then every man arose again, after counting his money.

Maffei had explained plainly what was needed, and though the night's adventure included the forcing open of a nunnery and the removal of some women, none of these desperadoes hesitated.

Maffei, with a cunning which was characteristic of the peon race, had put everything in a pleasant and favorable light.

But the cunning rascal had another part of his plot to carry out.

Having recruited his ragged regiment, and placed himself at their head, he proceeded with his masters to leave the house by a back and secret way, which admitted of the return of all the gang of ruffians without exciting the suspicion or envy of their fellows.

The night was dark, the police absent, and nothing was easier than to reach the convent unnoticed.

But to enter within its walls was a different thing.

It was surrounded by a high wall.

Its gates, lofty and impregnable, were closed for the night, and it appeared impossible to effect an entrance.

But the artful cunning of Maffei was equal to any emergency.

He knew that, in cases of sudden and serious sickness, there was always a sister ready to emerge from the gloomy portals.

Upon this good point in the character of the nuns he relied for obtaining admittance, and aiding his villainous master in carrying out his nefarious scheme.

Maffei rapped at a cottage door, in which was a light burning, and a tall, ungainly man came to the door. Maffei pushed him inside, and showed him five new dollars.

"What am I to do to earn them?" asked the other, with savage greed.

"Look here, Santo," replied Maffei, "you must ask no questions, but obey, and if successful, you shall have three times the money."

"*Madre de Dios!*" he cried. "I would descend to the bottomless pit for half the money!"

"Then go to the convent doors, ring, and say that your wife is very ill, and will die if one of the sisters does not come with a remedy," whispered Maffei.

"I will do what you ask me," said the avaricious ruffian.

Maffei at once led him out, and Santo saw himself surrounded by a band of fellows whose faces were concealed by slouched hats.

The gate of the convent was reached, and the bell was pulled.

After several similar applications a shrill voice answered:

"Who is there at this hour?"

"Jose, the lame cobbler," replied the other.

"What do you want, you evil one?"

"My poor wife is ill with a cramp—I believe dying, and I want Sister Francesca to come to her; do, for the love of all the saints!" he whined.

"Cannot she wait until the morning?" asked the priestess.

"She will be dead," he responded.

"Bird of ill omen!" she said, "come into the lodge and wait. I have no doubt Sister Francesca has heard the bell, and is getting ready."

Saying which, she pulled the cord that made the gate swing on its hinges, and it opened.

Maffei knew that if any suspicion fell upon Santo in reference to the nefarious deeds of that night, he, to exculpate himself, would, as a matter of course, betray his employers.

"Give me the money, and let me go," whispered Santo.

But Maffei slipped the money into his pocket, and drawing his dagger, plunged it into the other's heart.

He fell like a log with scarcely even a sigh.

Then Maffei rushed into the lodge, waving his weapon, and caught the portress by the arm.

"Lead me to where the Senoras Miriam and Maria are imprisoned," he said, ferociously.

The unfortunate woman knew now how she had been trapped.

She would have resisted, but life was dear, even in that semi-prison state, and she yielded.

The men were left to guard the lodge, while the rest of the party followed the portress.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### THE SUPERIOR AND THE GIRLS.

It happened that neither Miriam nor Maria had retired to rest.

They occupied an apartment replete with every comfort.

It was with no little surprise that the two girls at ten o'clock that night, saw a very luxurious supper brought in, with covers for three.

"The lady superior will sup with you," said one of the attendants, in answer to an inquiring look.

The girls exchanged glances, but had no time to speak, ere the lady abbess entered.

She was most gracious, and informed them that, thinking they might be dull, she had come to pass an hour or two with them.

The meal was consumed almost in silence, but after this the abbess proceeded to speak graciously of their past and future.

"I suppose," she said, with a smile which was partially sad and partially bitter, "that you have lived in the world only time enough to see its beauties, and not its darker spots?"

"Our lives, lady," replied Miriam, "have been checkered enough. We have had very sad trials, but we are not of those who despond. We believe that there is happiness yet in store for us."

"Do you think," she continued, with a pitying smile, "that any such happiness can be found in such a calm retreat as this?"

"Some years hence we may think so." said Miriam, gently—she believed the woman meant well—"but should like to judge for ourselves first."

"Believe me, my daughters," replied the superioress,

with a shake of the head, "there is no such calm and peaceful joy in the world as is to be met with here. But there, I will not sermonize. I am told you are rarely beautiful singers. Let me hear a duet."

Glad to change the subject, the girls arose and went to the piano.

"You have been carefully taught?" she asked, when they had concluded. "To whom do you owe such mastery over your voice and instrument?"

"Our mother first," replied Miriam, with a painful smile, "then masters, both foreign and native."

"You sing well. How I should like to hear you in the choir to-morrow," urged the worthy and excellent lady.

"We will sing with pleasure," they replied, glad of any relief to the monotony of their existence, and aware as well that on these days the public were admitted to hear if not to see.

At this moment, a dull murmur was heard in the passage without, and the door burst open, and the majority of the nuns came rushing in, with wild passionate cries.

"What means this folly?" cried the abbess with an angry flushed face, as the girls came flocking around her.

The rush of a band of armed men, of the lowest class of leperos, was the answer.

The abbess addressed the mob.

"Back, you sacrilegious men, who have dared to violate the sanctuary! What seek you? Take our wealth, take what you will, but harm not my doves!" she cried.

The Mexicans laughed.

"We do not want to harm any of your doves," said the harsh voice of Maffei, advancing a few steps, "but we want the persons of the Senoras Miriam and Maria Di Lasso, unjustly detained."

The two young personages in question might have remained unknown from the others, but from their abject terror.

"Save us!" they cried, falling on their knees before the mother. "Save us—do anything with us, but do not give us up to these men!"

Two men, masked, in cloaks and slouched hats, advanced, seized the shrieking girls in their arms, and moved away.

"If you don't hold your tongues," said Maffei, to the remaining girls, "it will be the worse for you. As for those silly fools, when they find they have been carried away by their own sweethearts, they will only be too glad."

The girls were wrapped in heavy cloaks, to silence their outcries, and were then carried to where the small cavalcade of horsemen awaited them.

They were mounted, placed between two cavaliers, and thus guarded, started on the road to Sonora, under the charge of Maffei.

The ruffians dispersed, having received their pay, the marquis and viscount returned to their palace secretly, and when morning came, only the dead body of the wretched Santo was there to indicate that a great calamity had occurred during the night.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### A FELL ACCUSATION.

It was twelve o'clock next day when Charles and Denby, having breakfasted with Mr. Thompson, had risen to take their leave of that jovial but excellent diplomat.

At this moment a liveried servant entered to say that a messenger from the archbishop's palace demanded immediate admission.

"Show him in," said Charles, eagerly.

The person who came in was a lay servant of high position.

He bowed sufficiently politely to the ambassador, and then addressed the two young men.

"His eminence wishes to see you at once," he said, coldly.

"Have we your permission?" said Charles.

"Certainly, my boys," he answered, in a low tone. "But keep your eyes open. You are getting into a dangerous net."

A carriage awaited them below, into which they entered, in which they were speedily driven to the palace of the archbishop.

They were left in a dull, dreary ante-chamber, where nothing but a large table and some chairs served as furniture.

Presently the archbishop entered, accompanied by his private secretary.

His face was stern, his mien was cold and rigid, and he did not even bow to the strangers.

"Pray, your eminence," said Charles, "to what do we owe this sudden summons?"

"Hypocrites!" cried the bishop. "Do you pretend to be ignorant of the fearful and disgraceful outrage of last night?"

"What outrage, in the name of all that is good and holy?" asked Charles, clasping his hand.

The bishop looked at him keenly.

Then, in cold words, he told of the abduction of the girls.

The two heard him in horrified silence.

"My lord bishop," said Charles Leicester, when he had finished, "and you suppose that we two gentlemen have been concerned in this foul and inhuman outrage?"

"Whom am I to suspect?" asked the worthy old man.

"The marquis," they cried.

"He was here three hours ago to denounce you," replied the prelate; "but pray be seated. I have acted in the heat and the spur of the moment."

The young men obeyed his command with a look of profound horror.

"Of course you can explain where you were all last night?" he said.

"Certainly," replied Charles: "we can give an account of every instant of our time: though we should think anything of the kind hardly necessary."

"There is a fearful double crime to punish—murder and sacrilege," said the bishop, "and as you are accused, and in turn accuse others, everything must be done legally."

"But in the meantime," cried Charles, "the young ladies are being carried off into hopeless captivity, at the mercy of their unnatural guardians."

"What would you do if you were free?" asked the worthy bishop.

"Search the wide world for them," responded Denby.

"Young man, there is a ring of truth about you which I will not seek to deny. I will, and do believe you," he said, "and by unnecessary delays will not keep your task of love and duty. One moment."

And he wrote some lines on a scrap of paper, which he handed to the domestic who entered.

"I have sent for the marquis and his son," he said, "to confront them with you."

And informing them that he had pressing business, he retired.

Above where they sat was a gallery, and a minute or two later they might have seen a head protruding and listening.

"What on earth shall we do?" asked Charles; "in this country, where there is no protection for life or property, our task is a difficult one."

"Surely it will be easy to find where the country seat of this hidalgo is situated," retorted Denby, "and then we must try the fortune of war."

"Bravely spoken, Denby," said his friend; "how fortunate for me to find such a Pylades."

"We love," continued the other, "two brave and noble girls, and we mean, I suppose, to follow them up, while life lasts."

"Amen; but unless the good bishop helps us, I fear we

shall have but a poor chance. Mexico is a wild country, and we know not where they may be hidden," mused Charles.

At this moment the bishop entered with an angry and perturbed countenance.

"The marquis and his son have taken their departure for their country seat," he said, angrily; "this absolves you at once."

"Can your eminence help us to follow them?" they asked.

"I will do all in the power of man to rescue these two girls from a cruel fate. Go back to your hotel; in an hour you will hear from me."

With many thanks and protestations of gratitude, the young men retired.

Despite their youth and courage they were very downhearted, for they seemed very far away from the fruition of their hopes.

They, however, commanded Watson to first procure a guide and some muleteers, and then waited.

In an hour came a packet from the bishop with the country address of the marquis of Aranja, while in the packet were numerous letters for persons of high position, one in particular to an Irish resident, who owned considerable property in the neighborhood.

"Be cautions, and advise with Senor Patricio Fitzpatrick," said the bishop; "he is my friend, and both a generous and honest man."

All these affairs settled, as far as they were themselves concerned, they now adjourned to the embassy, and fortunately found Thompson disengaged.

They briefly explained, and Charles asked for a furlough for the month.

"Take three," he answered, warmly, "only let me hear from you regularly. I shall be on the rack until you return. Above all, my brave lads, be cautious and beware of treachery."

Of course they promised all, and soon after sitting down in company with some visitors to dinner, they had to converse on topics of a very different nature.

They, however, made some excuse to leave early, and returning to the residence, prepared for their adventurous if not perilous journey.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE HACIENDA OF ARANJA.

A MEXICAN country house partakes more of the nature of a fortress than an ordinary residence.

It is surrounded by high walls, protected by a ditch, and has a lofty look-out.

Within, there are the gardens of the residence, usually very beautiful, with a great variety of ornamental flowers and trees.

Some few weeks after the events which had occurred in the city of Mexico, the reader might have been surprised to see Miriam and Maria beneath a veranda looking out upon a lawn.

They were reclining on hammocks, gently swinging themselves with their feet.

They appeared to be alone, but a glance into the room behind them indicated the presence of two duennas.

"What a weary life this is," said Miriam, with a sigh.

"And yet we must submit to it. Here no friends can penetrate, no sympathetic hearts beat in unison with our own, or any means of communication be found with those who care for us," sighed Maria.

"In my opinion," observed Miriam, "never will they desert us."

"But should they follow, should they trace us here even, of what avail?" said Maria. "Were the marquis to invite them to the house—are we not helpless—are we not now in a state of bondage, from which there is no escape, save—save death?"

Miriam made no answer for a moment, but after a glance at the two women, who luckily were sipping coffee, she said:

"These Americans are brave," were her whispered words, "and who knows, even that great sorrow might be got over."

"Would to Heaven it could, for without that there can be no happiness for us on earth," said the other.

The women now joined in the conversation.

Miriam and Maria presently arose and indicated their wish to take a walk in the garden that bordered the river which went around three-quarters of the estate, thus doing without the necessity of high walls.

The women could not urge any objection.

Walking with arms around one another's waists, they reached the wood which skirted the river, and got under the shade.

There was a seat overlooking the river, which was about fifty feet wide, and on the other bank was another wood.

Both girls, as they seated themselves, seemed to have a similiar thought.

"What were you thinking of, Miriam?' said Maria, with a faint blush.

"I am afraid you guess but too well," replied the other; "of our brave young Americans."

"But what is the use of thinking?" continued Maria. "Shall we ever see them more?"

"Don't you think they are brave enough to follow us?" urged Miriam.

"Brave enough, but what could they do here, surrounded as we are, guarded as we are, under, as it were, a spell?" said Maria.

"Nevertheless, little unbeliever, I have the utmost confidence. Rely upon it, they are upon our track."

At this moment there was a whizz heard in the air, and starting up, they saw an arrow sticking in a tree close at hand.

They eagerly snatched it from its place of rest, and undid a letter wrapped around its stem.

It was eagerly opened—oh! how eagerly—by the girls, whose eyes sparkled, whose bosoms heaved, whose color came and went fitfully.

"MIRIAM AND MARIA, your friends are near. Be in this grove to-night, and we shall be on hand. If all is safe, sing '*Non piu mesta.*' CHARLES AND ARTHUR."

They waved the letter on high toward the other shore, and saw a hand with a white handkerchief respond to their signal.

"The marquis is asking for you, ladies," said the querulous voice of one of the duennas.

"We are coming," cried Miriam.

"Where have you hid yourselves?" the woman said, crossly; "the marquis is hunting for you everywhere."

"Except where we could have been found in five minutes," coolly responded Miriam; "pray what does his lordship want with us now?"

"The marquis will tell you," responded the woman, and led the way toward the house without another word.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### THE ULTIMATUM—A SURPRISE.

THE marquis and the viscount awaited the two girls in the summer parlor.

"What are your commands?" said Miriam.

"Foolish and disobedient girl," replied the marquis, "I have sent for you to say that this contumacy of yours can last no longer. Here," holding up some official-looking documents, "are the legal licenses, enabling us to marry you when and where we like. The priest will be here this evening. You will be prepared to obey."

"Never!" said both, with one voice.

"Fools; do you wish to see your slave-mother flogged?" hissed the marquis.

Both shivered with horror.

"Your mother, being a slave, could not be legally married to my brother," continued the marquis; "you, therefore, are not legitimate heiresses, but simply slaves, goods and chattels on the estate. It is only to save you from scorn that we have treated you as heiresses. We do not want to expose your real position, and are willing to condone everything by marriage."

"Death were welcome— the most foul and cruel death— anything save dishonor. Better be the abject slave of an honorable man than the so-called wife of a cruel and vindictive scoundrel!" cried Miriam.

"Beware, girl, how you arouse me," said the marquis; "to-night ends your rebellion."

"Come away," Miriam continued; "I cannot remain in the room."

"The priest will be here at nine," sneered the marquis, "and the ceremony will be performed at ten."

The girls made no reply.

There was a great dread in their souls.

This man was cruel, wicked and determined, and what could they do?

Only one hope remained.

As soon as it was eight o'clock they would go into the garden, and both felt that the gallant young Americans would not desert them.

But some hours must elapse before the wished-for meeting, and during the interval they had a sacred duty to perform.

In a part of the house entirely separate from the rest, and connected with it only by means of a passage, resided a person whom we have not as yet seen.

A beautiful, fair woman, with white face, rich auburn hair, and a soft, dreamy expression of countenance, arising probably from ill-health.

She had several attendants, but she never quitted the apartment assigned her.

This was Guadalupe Lasso, the one-time mistress of that house—the proud, much-loved wife of Gaspar, Marquis Di Trejico, the mother of Miriam and Maria—now without power or authority.

The brother-in-law, who, during his brother's life, had been her abject suitor, now refused her even a voice in the estate.

"She was a slave," he said, "a born Louisiana slave, and therefore could not be a wife."

She indignantly and proudly denied the statement.

But the new marquis had in his possession documents, the affidavits of slave dealers, to prove she had been sold and bought.

The affair was not made public for reasons which the marquis did not explain, but which will appear in the course of this narrative.

"My darling girls!" cried the fond mother, as they entered the room; "come to see me at last?"

They knelt by her side.

Their affection for this poor afflicted parent, who had always been so good and gentle, was something angelic.

"Forgive us, mamma darling," said Miriam; "but we have been so full of trouble."

"Anything fresh, my dears?" she cried, putting her hands upon their heads.

"Nothing fresh; but the marquis has again informed us that unless we yield to his wishes this night, he will use even the most base and cowardly means to compel us," cried Miriam.

"He has threatened to ill use my poor girls?" she said, fondling them.

"He has, mamma," they answered.

"My daughters, the man is mad. He is a monster of the deepest dye; but fear not. Never shall any one lay hands on me. I have resigned myself to my fate; since my husband's death I have lived only for you. I have endured the foul shame of being called a slave—I have submitted to be assumed a vile woman; but let him not go too far."

She drew a small pocket pistol from a concealed pocket.

"I will shoot him as I would a dog," she calmly added.

"Mother—mother!" they cried.

"I suffer. As long as this wretch keeps away from me, and degrades me not, I am content to live; but let him not go too far. Girls, you are women now; so I will tell you why the villain acts as he has done: you will then know how to prefer death to being his wife—you, Miriam, or his son's wife, Maria."

"Anything fresh?" they asked.

"No. The villain, during your father's life, dared tell me that he loved me, and when I threatened to have him scourged off the estate, like a hound that he is, bade me beware, for his hour of triumph would come. It has come."

"Good Heaven!" they cried.

"The man knows that somewhere there is in existence a will in which my birth and parentage are set forth. He knows that if this will could be found, he is a ruined man. My husband learned his villainy by accident, and during his last illness revoked his will."

"Have you no knowledge," cried Miriam, "where that will is to be found?"

"None, my child," said the poor mother. "In his last illness he told me how he had discovered his brother's baseness. He was about to tell me, not only who had the will, but some secret in connection with the marquis, when his voice failed him. When he recovered, he was suddenly called away to join the army, and was killed."

"Oh, mother—mother, if this will could only be found!" exclaimed Miriam, earnestly, "you would be free and able to punish this man."

"True, my child," she said, with a deep sigh; "but I cannot even imagine where it was concealed. But Heaven, in its own good time, will evolve the mystery."

"Mamma," began Miriam, with a look at her sister, and a slight blush, "we have something very particular to tell you."

"Speak, my darling."

"We are going out to meet the brave young Americans this evening," Miriam half whispered.

"They have followed you?" she cried.

"Yes, mother."

"Could you not contrive for me to see them?" urged the anxious mother. "If I could but speak with them a few minutes, I should tell at once whether they are to be trusted or not."

"Mother!" they cried.

"My darlings, you are at that bright and beautiful age when maidens think every young man an angel of light. I have nothing to say against them; but, if they are honorable men, they will not hesitate to see your mother."

"Shall we bring them here?"

"Yes; you know the secret door?" she asked, handing them a key.

It was with rapturous delight that the girls hurried away to the garden.

Theirs was an age of buoyancy and hope, and shielded by a mother, with two noble and gallant lovers, they felt almost as if they could defy their wicked relative.

The knew him not only as their guardian, but their uncle.

The quibble by which he got rid of the consanguinity question was that he was only a half-brother.

They reached the banks of the stream without being watched.

No sooner did the girls show themselves on the bank, than there shot from the opposite side a boat.

In it were the two friends.

We will not note what passed during the first two minutes.

The young ladies found themselves mysteriously separated from each other for a brief space, and we are very much afraid that our noble friends behaved very much as rustics might have done, and before speaking stole a kiss from lips which, though coy, were not actually reluctant.

"You will escape at once," said Charles.

"No," replied Miriam, firmly; "come with us, and judge for yourself."

There was no hesitation on the part of the young men.

Where the enchantress led them, there were they ready to follow.

The back of the house was soon reached, and passing through a court-yard, they came to a doorway, half concealed by roses and myrtles, which had to be pushed on one side before the door could be opened.

They were then at the foot of the stairs.

The girls led the way up, and Miriam rushing forward, Maria remained behind about a minute, and then ushered the young men into the apartment occupied by Guadalupe Lasso, the Marchioness Di Trejico.

"Mamma," said Miriam, very proudly, and yet with a smile, "this is Charles Leicester, this is Arthur Denby."

"This is indeed a surprise," said the *attache*, "and a very pleasant surprise. We did not expect such an honor," he added.

"Gentlemen, sit down," said Guadalupe, "and I will explain why my children are not allowed to speak of me, forbidden to refer to my existence."

They looked at one another.

"The monster of iniquity, the miscreant who is ruler in this house, declares that I am a slave, and that legally in the country where I was married and they were born, they are slaves!" she cried.

"But it is a foul calumny!" exclaimed Charles.

"Young man, I am told that you and your friend have expressed some admiration for my darling girls. I wished to see you, to learn if you cared for them only for their wealth and position, or whether you would dare the world's scorn if the marquis proves them to be the wretched outcast offspring of a slave."

"I for one would take Miriam to wife, without a penny, and never regard as a stain on her that which she cannot help!" exclaimed Charles, taking Miriam's hand in his.

"I say so with all my heart," added Denby, sidling up to Maria.

The girls said nothing, but there was an eloquence in the eye which nothing can read.

"Bravely spoken," said the proud and happy mother; "but know that on their father's side they are hidalgos of the purest Spanish blood, while, Charles Leicester," she added, with a faint smile, "their mother is a Leicester."

The surprise created by this announcement may be more readily conceived than explained.

"A Leicester, my dear madam?" cried the young man.

"Yes; your father had an uncle, who was not on the best of terms with his family. He came to Louisiana, married a rich heiress. I am Stanhope Leicester's only daughter."

"Heaven!" exclaimed Charles; "my father spent hundreds trying to trace him. He believed that when a boy he wronged his uncle, and tried to discover his whereabouts."

"I know; but my father was very proud. He was a rich cotton planter, a man of fabulous wealth in money and slaves," she added, with a deep sigh, "and did not care to renew acquaintance with his New York friends."

"But, my dear lady, how does this man dare to lord it over you?" asked Leicester.

"By an old will which my husband made when he believed in him. That will was revoked, but we have never been able to find it," she continued, "but we must now speak of more pressing matters."

"With pleasure!"

"You truly and honorably love my daughters?" she said.

"As our future wives," they answered.

"Bravely and manfully spoken," said the mother. "But how to keep these miscreants at bay? I have written a full statement of the case to the archbishop, but it may be weeks before I get an answer."

"The bishop is our friend. We are here by his consent and connivance," cried Charles.

"And he knows they are heretics?"

"Yes; but he is a man of the world, and will, I believe, befriend them," urged Charles.

Guadalupe Lasso now explained the intentions of the marquis.

"It is nearly nine," she said; "he says the priest will be here at ten. If he is admitted to this house there will be a terrible tragedy. I will shoot the villain through the head rather than degrade my daughters."

"We will leave at once," cried Charles; "be in no fear; by fair means or foul we will stop the priest."

"You need use no violence with him. The wine cup and a few dollars will go a long way. But lose no time. If he is to be here at ten, rely upon it, you will waylay him at the inn."

Without a moment's delay they were taken to the place where their boat was moored, and after a deeply earnest parting, started on their journey.

When the girls, with wildly beating hearts, rejoined their mother, they found, both to their disgust and surprise, that the marquis and his son were present.

They had been drinking, and were unusually brutal and arrogant in their manner.

"Woman," said the elder man, "have you brought these proud wenches around to a proper sense of their duties?"

"I must beg you will address me correctly. I am the Marchioness Trejico."

"Marchioness!" roared the elder, with a coarse laugh; "we'll marchioness you. If you don't make these girls succumb to our will, you shall taste the cat of nine tails!"

"Flog your brother's wife!" she said, in a tone of deep disgust and horror.

"Wife," laughed the ruffian, "wife me no wives, or with my own hand will I chastise the base slave who dares to insult an honorable family."

And he actually raised his cane and stepped forward, white with passion.

Miriam rushed forward, snatched the bamboo from his hand, and broke it in two pieces.

"My daughter," said the marchioness, quietly, "you should not have interfered. Had he touched me, he would have been a dead man, and you would have been free."

And then she leveled the exquisitely-made pistol at his head.

With flashing eyes and swelling bosom Miriam confronted the marquis.

He turned livid.

"Dastard," cried the marchioness, "you need not fear now; but lay this to your soul, that never before were you so near death. I am a patient, long-suffering woman; for the sake of my children, I have borne with much—but a blow never. Death shall be the portion of the being who dares strike me. Fool, beware! Do you know that my cousin, Charles Leicester, is in Mexico, and that an appeal to him means utter ruin to you?"

The marquis stood still a moment as if annihilated, but then, recovering himself, spoke:

,'The gentleman you speak of, and whom you so madly claim as a relation, has quite enough to do to look after himself. He is accused of sacrilege," he sneered.

"Accused of your crime," she answered.

"All this is useless recrimination," said the marquis, impatiently. "You know my terms. Give your free and unreserved consent to the marriage of your daughters to

us, and we will destroy the proofs of your base birth, and allow you to appear in society as the fair mother of two charming heiresses. Refuse, and be assured, if nothing else happens, you will be taken into Louisiana, and sold."

At this moment a horn sounded outside, and indicated that some one demanded admission.

"Fra Antonio," cried the count; "so, ladies, prepare for your wedding."

The girls shivered as they listened, and curling their arms around one another's necks, wept.

"Be calm, my children," said the poor mother. "Put your trust in Heaven. This monstrous crime shall never be consummated. Ring for chocolate; I am faint and ill."

Meanwhile, the marquis and his son had gone to the reception-room of the hacienda, there to receive the priest.

Imagine their surprise and astonishment, when the major-domo ushered in their neighbor, Colonel Fitzpatrick.

"To what fortunate coincidence, most hospitable neighbor," said the marquis, with rather mock politeness, "do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Well, I and my people have been out ostrich hunting, and being late, have come to ask for shelter for the night. We should have stopped at the posada, only that drunken priest, Fra Antonio, was making such a beast of himself that the place was crowded."

"Command our house," said the marquis, in true Spanish style. "Everything we have is at your service."

"While I am here, I have another errand to perform. My daughters have not seen the charming senoritas for some time. When will they ride around?" asked the Irish gentleman.

"Oh, they shall come to-morrow," cried the marquis, who always liked to keep up appearances.

"And their charming mamma?" continued the polite Irishman.

"Her chronic malady incapacitates her from receiving friends or paying visits," said the marquis, stiffly.

As he spoke he rang for his major-domo, and bade him send in refreshments, and prepare beds and every other convenience for the travelers.

In every hacienda, which is as large usually as about six good-sized American farm-houses, there is a large room specially reserved to the use of travelers.

Colonel Fitzpatrick, as a neighbor and a friend, was provided with a bedroom, but the hunters and others who had accompanied him were put into this room.

They were ten in number, and wore the picturesque costume of the Mexican hunter.

Two of the hunters held aloof from the others, and spoke in a low tone.

Beneath the rather transparent disguise might have been recognized Arthur Denby and Charles Leicester.

Colonel Fitzpatrick, with whom they were staying, had amply carried out the wishes of his friend the archbishop.

He had received the young men with open arms.

There was no man in Sonora who knew the marquis better than he did.

"There is no snake on the prairies so dangerous, no panther so cunning and wily. Beware. You must not meet this man openly and face to face. He is an unmitigated scoundrel, and could proof be found, would be hung," he cried. "As for the girls and their dear mother, we would only be too glad to see them out of his clutches."

They had explained the footing on which they stood.

"I know I ought to be angry with you two Protestant boys carrying off such beautiful heiresses. But there, it can't be helped. Human nature is human nature all the world over, and the boys will love the girls," said the jolly Irishman.

"Papa," said his daughter Norah, while Di lifted her finger at him, "will you talk like a gentleman?"

They were, indeed, two bright and lovely girls, one seventeen, the other nineteen.

Both were heart whole.

The arrival of two handsome, highly-educated, and refined Americans was an event in their lives.

It was with something of a jealous pang that they heard that they were there on a love expedition.

But they were very warm-hearted, generous girls, and soon took an interest in the young men.

They were well acquainted with Miriam and Maria, and liked them much.

It was agreed on that day that the young men should be initiated in the mysteries of ostrich hunting, and that in pursuit of these very valuable birds they should go near the hacienda of Aranja.

It would then be easy to slip away, and try for an interview with the girls.

All turned out as they expected, and the colonel agreed to wait at the posada for their return.

When they came back the young men told all, and it was agreed, not only that the priest should be stopped on the way, but that Colonel Fitzpatrick, to whom they could not refuse hospitality, should ask shelter for the night.

This would secure the girls immunity for the time.

It was also arranged that an invitation, which Spanish-American politeness couldn't refuse, should be given.

As the presence of the two young Americans was not even suspected, there could be no reason for refusing.

All were well aware that the mother would be left as a hostage.

It was this cunning device that had made Miriam, when in Europe, so obedient to the will of her uncle and guardian.

All had succeeded as they desired.

Next morning after breakfast the hunters and peons in attendance on Colonel Fitzpatrick were early in the saddle.

The two young ladies, who had readily consented to the visit for reasons which may be imagined, were mounted soon after breakfast, and with their special servants in charge, departed in company with Colonel Fitzpatrick.

They were warned to return early, and knew that any disobedience would be reflected upon their mother.

All Mexican houses are flat-roofed, and as soon as the girls had departed, the father and son, from some odd impulse, ascended to the roof and looked out.

They saw the girls trotting beside the colonel until they reached the escort that awaited them.

Then two hunters, with broad-brimmed hats and ponchos, bowed and rode up to the girls, who extended their hands.

"Who the *demonio* can they be?" cried the marquis, in an angry tone. "The colonel seems to me to derogate very much."

"Like his impudence. But if they are persons fit to speak to the girls," said the son, "why did he not introduce them?"

"It looks queer. I shall go around to the posada and see that drunken Fra Antonio," said the marquis; "it appears to me that somebody is playing the fool with us."

"It looks like it," said the count.

And both going down, ordered their horses, and were soon dashing over the prairie on their way to the posada of Santa Maria, where an unexpected and singular surprise awaits them.

This is what had happened at the posada to prevent the priest being in time to carry out his villainous machinations.

The two young men, after their interview with Miriam and Maria, mounted the horses which were concealed in one of the numerous thickets, and rode as fast as possible to the inn where they were waited for by their companions.

They had scarcely dismounted and assumed a careless attitude, when there came in sight two priests mounted on mules, and guided by a muleteer.

The priests dismounted, and our friends respectfully raised their hats.

The jovial monks muttered something and then passed into the room, where a minute later food, wine and *aqua ardiente* were placed before them.

Then Charles Leicester and Arthur Denby entered, and hoped their reverends found everything to their taste.

The monks, in a dignified tone, thanked them very much, upon which they retired to consult with the colonel.

The innkeeeper was easily brought over to the interests of the noble cavaliers who spent their money so freely, and promised that the priests should not leave the inn that night.

This promise he kept by joining them and telling some of the stories to which these degenerate Mexicans are so partial, plying them all the while with potent drink.

The rest we know.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### NORAH.

NORAH FITZPATRICK was one of those Irish girls who, under a merry and laughing exterior, conceal a loving, warm heart, capable of the deepest emotions.

Norah was very beautiful, and, brought up in the society of her sister, father, and governess, had known only the smooth side of human nature.

Though only sixteen, the climate and her Mexican mother made her appear nearer eighteen, and she had already several lovers.

But not one had touched her maiden heart, a circumstance which was a source of great satisfaction to her father, who was meditating an early flight to his beloved Ireland, where he believed his lovely gems would be duly admired and advantageously settled.

The colonel was obliged to be very careful.

If it had been known that he had been realizing all his property, selling his shares in diamond mines, etc., he would have been accused of some political crime and thrown into prison.

His daughters were not even taken into his confidence, though they knew something was about to happen.

The arrival of Charles and Arthur was not without its influence on their feelings.

Then their father, who was keen-eyed, though reticent, took care casually to mention that they were in love, engaged, in fact, and in search of their charming mistresses.

Norah and her sister Di sat watching for the return of their father and his friends.

They were on the flat roof about mid-day, after the late morning meal, and, seated under a pleasant tent, were looking out in the direction of the road by which the principal entrance was reached.

"See, they come," said Di, triumphantly.

"Yes, riding along in haste," replied Norah. "I can make out papa's tall, majestic figure, but the others are behind, and they are dressed as common hunters, too."

"*Quereda!*" retorted Di, "they have been hunting strange game."

"What do you mean?" asked Norah.

"Girls—at all events, women," said Di, with a mischievous laugh.

There was no laugh, however, on the lips of Norah.

Somehow, the earnest desire for their return had all faded away.

She could not tell why.

"I must be ready to play the hostess, Di," she said, a little fretfully, "so come along."

"Any company is a change," responded the merry young girl, as she followed her more majestic sister.

They reached the extensive reception-room and waited.

Soon a crowd of horsemen dashed into the court-yard, and presently the colonel entered the room, followed by two young and handsome girls, attended by their duenna.

No one else.

"My dears," said the hospitable Irishman, "I bring you Miriam and Maria Di Lasso, who come to claim your hospitality for a day or so."

"They are welcome," replied Norah, with a warmth which was no deceit, and a reserved regret that was painful. "I should not have known them."

"That means, ladies," said the hearty Irishman, "that you have improved out of all knowledge. They have grown handsome, I must say."

"Now, colonel," interrupted Miriam, with a sweet smile, as the girls embraced according to the fashion of the country, "you always were a flatterer. You should leave that act of folly to younger men."

"Already," laughed the colonel; "and they have only gone to change their dress. Norah will give orders for rooms to be prepared."

Norah readily requested the Mexican senoras to follow her, and at once took them to the guests' chamber, and after passing half an hour in the innocent prattle of maidens, they returned to join the lords of creation.

Charles and Arthur, in the costume of their real position in society, advanced to greet the daughters of their host.

There was a slight flush on Norah's face, a rather painful compression of the lips, as she invited them to partake of refreshments.

At the table both young gentlemen were too well-bred to address their conversation to their lady-loves exclusively.

But there were occasional intonations of voice, stolen looks, which to the parties principally concerned had meaning enough.

After the sumptuous lunch came the cigars and coffee, upon which the ladies retired.

Soon, too, the colonel showed signs of wishing to enjoy his favorite *siesta*, and the two young men retired to their own rooms, where they snatched an hour of brief repose.

At the end of that time Charles came into Arthur's room.

"My dear fellow," he began, "before we indulge in our duties of dressing for dinner, I want to have a talk."

"My dear fellow," said Denby, "let me hear to what your eloquence tends."

"I have been racking my brain to find some plan for outwitting this unmitigated scoundrel, the marquis. He has papers in his possession to prove that their mother was a born slave, and then in the eyes of the law, our charming girls are themselves slaves."

"But slavery is legally abolished in this country," urged Denby.

"It is; but a rich man can evade all laws. Besides, twenty-four hours would take him into a free slave State," continued Charles.

"They are not colored people," said Denby, in an exasperating tone.

"I know they are not. But if they obstinately refuse to gratify the whim of these men, they will be spirited away, and the marquis and his scoundrel son will reign in their place," urged Charles Leicester.

"But what does all this lead to, except that we run away with them at once?" said Denby, now fairly aroused.

"We cannot. They will not leave their mother, whom the villains retain as hostage. No, we must bide our time and contrive to carry off the mother as well, place her under the protection of the law, and then let the tribunal decide."

"You are right," said Denby.

"Do you not see," said Charles, whom love had made far-sighted, "if the marquis can prove that the marchioness was a slave, the poor girls are ruined?"

"How so?" asked the young lord.

"The marriage took place when slavery was absolutely the law of the land. In this case, she having been a slave, there was no marriage, and you see the consequences," said Charles, dolefully.

"Poor girls!" sighed Arthur.

"Surely their misfortune," cried Charles, irritably, "does not change your real sentiments toward them?"

"Charles," said Denby, in his most dreadful lisping tone, "if you insult me, I shall—ah—be compelled to chastise you."

"Forgive my irritability," replied Charles, "and give us your fist."

And these two loyal young Americans, faithful unto death, shook hands, and went each into his own room to dress for dinner.

There were several young gentlemen and friends, the hospitable Irishman keeping open house, to whom the travelers were introduced as Messrs. Debret and Peerage, as good a name for a Mexican as any other, so any intimacy was impossible.

After dinner, when men and women all retired together, all thought of anything but music and song was abandoned.

Miriam and Maria were celebrated for their duets, with guitar accumpaniment, while Norah and Di were excellent players on the piano, and knew duets popular in America.

Presently Norah selected one which required a male voice.

It was written in English, and was a rather passionate love song.

She turned to Charles, and asked him to sing it with her.

The two went to the instrument.

It was a wild, weird melody, telling the cruel story of a pair of lovers, parted by fate, and who, while professing undying attachment, recognized the absolute necessity of separation.

They were both accomplished musicians, both as to voice and expression, and both put into the simulation of passion and grief such reality as electrified the audience.

When they concluded, Charles arose with a laugh, and, seeing a chair vacant beside Miriam, walked slowly across the room and secured it.

"I was not aware," said Miriam, with a dry little laugh, "that you were such an accomplished musician and actor."

"It is a gift of which I am not very proud. It is an accident, and, to please my mother and sisters, I cultivated it," he answered. "'Tis rarely that I own to it."

"Miss Fitzpatrick is the more honored," she added.

"I could not point blank refuse a lady," responded Charles. who felt that the other was piqued. "I wonder whether we might not find one we could sing together."

"My voice, I fear, would not go so harmoniously as that of Norah," she said, a little more loudly; "but I will try."

A duet was found, not of the wild and passionate kind, but softly melodious, the outpouring of two happy hearts in the trammels of love.

This musical effort was almost as successful as the previous one.

After this chocolate and other refreshments were handed around, and the company dispersed.

"Maria," said Miriam, when she was alone with her sister, and her chamber-door was securely fastened, "don't you think Charles Leicester very much changed?"

"I think he flirted a little bit with Norah," responded Maria, yawning; "and so did Arthur with Di; but I think that was policy."

"Maria, be not too sure. They know now the supposed taint upon our birth; they know that, if our vile guardian can only prove his charge, we are neither heiresses nor fit associates for their relatives," she cried, bitterly. "It seems to me that since they knew this their ardor has cooled."

"Miriam, do not distress yourself, do not malign our noble lovers. I am sure, since the fatal information has been given them, they have been even more tender and devoted. Ah, Miriam, do not be jealous. It is a false mistake. You did not like his singing with Norah."

"The singing I cared not for," she answered coldly; "it was the way, the manner, and the singular choice of the duet. I will not judge hastily, but I will watch. I have my eyes keenly fixed on the pair, and if I find anything to justify my suspicions, I will tear him from my heart as readily as I would cast a snake from me."

As she walked up and down the room, her hair dishevelled, her dress in disorder, she looked a very queen.

"Calm yourself, my dear," said Maria. "This is mere folly. If Charles be false, then will I believe all men the same."

"Heaven grant you may be right in your conjectures," sighed poor Miriam, quite exhausted by her tumultuous passions. "I will wait and hope."

Meanwhile another scene had taken place, not twenty yards away, which might have softened the proud heart of Miriam herself.

Norah, directly the adieux of the night were over, had hurried to her room, and at once shut the door.

She had hitherto been outwardly calm, but pale as death with inward and suppressed emotions.

Now she cast herself on a couch, and without restraint, gave way to a flood of tears.

"How he loves her—how he loves her!" burst from her lips like a wail of anguish; "and how grand and beautiful he is; how that heart-rending song made my bosom heave, and searched out the secret fibers of my soul. Such has been the man of my dreams, the vision of my waking hours, such as I never thought to find in the cold reality of life."

Then she arose, walked to the pier-glass, and looked at herself keenly.

"And this is Norah Fitzpatrick, the proud daughter of the colonel," she said to herself, "weeping over a man who loves another. Ha—ha—ha! If any one had dared to say as much, would I not have flouted them?"

It was a brave attempt at a laugh which followed, however, and then she cast herself into a luxurious armchair.

"In vain to struggle with fate, to bluster with the affections. I love him—yes, I love him! That which it would scorch my soul to have another suspect, I may confess to myself and not be ashamed," she cried, clasping her hands; "be still, my beating heart, and learn to hide your secret from every mortal eye. Were he to suspect, I should die of shame."

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

On the next morning Norah was the first to awaken.

She at once commanded the attendance of her maid, and after taking a bath, sallied forth in a peculiarly picturesque *deshabille* for the garden.

Charles Leicester was also awakened early, and seeing his companion and friend in a heavy sleep, he resolved not to awaken him, but made up his mind to have a stroll in the fresh morning air.

He knew the way about the house; besides, the peons and negresses were about, and readily directed him, and so it was not difficult for Charles to find what was called the ladies' bower.

When he caught a glimpse of a Mexican straw hat and a flowing dress under a tree in the distance, how his heart beat, how his pulse quickened.

And with a faint attempt at appearing unconcerned, he approached the tree.

"Hail, goddess of the morn," he said, in a soft voice,

how inexpressibly sweet even to the ears he spoke to; "you are early."

She turned and displayed the calm, laughing face of Norah.

"I am usually an early riser," she replied, giving her hand; "and to-day, perhaps, a little before my time. As, however, I have exceeded my morning stroll, and there are many guests to be seen to, you must forgive me if I return to the house."

"I will also return to awaken my friend," replied Charles.

And both moving along the path, came face to face with Miriam, who, despite her great resolution, was unable wholly to conceal her vexation.

"Dear Miriam," said Norah, with a light laugh, "as Mr. Leicester has now found that which he was in scarch of, allow me to run in and prepare for breakfast."

And she tripped off, as merry and light-hearted an Irish girl, to all appearance, as ever was seen; in reality, with a heavy, gasping weight at her bosom, which was nearly choking her.

"I have been out this quarter of an hour, dear Miriam," said Charles, in his usual frank and manly way, "and hoped to have found you in the garden."

"You found a charming substitute," she answered, as lightly as she could.

"Miriam," said Charles, in a tone of lofty severity, which he could assume at times, "never joke in matters of the heart. It is a thing which often leads to evil. As for supposing that you could be jealous, such a supposition would lower you too much in my opinion for me to dare entertain it."

Miriam could not help smiling.

The tone, the manner, let her young ladyship know one thing, and that was, that if they ever were married, she would have a master, one who would not be trifled with.

And her heart swelled with pride and exultation, for now she believed herself secure of his sole and undivided affection.

For fully a quarter of an hour they delayed, talking first of their heart's secrets, and then of the future.

"I can see only one plan," said Charles, explaining what he had hinted to Denby; "we must contrive to carry off your mother to Mexico city, place her under the protection of the American embassy, and defy the marquis."

"If it could be done all would be well," said Miriam; "were my mother quite free—free to speak and to act—she could annihilate the marquis. But even to us she will not whisper the dread secret while she is in his power."

"Have you no suspicion?" asked Charles.

"None whatever. Mother has told us that, did the marquis only suspect he would put her to a cruel death," she answered; "but there is the great bell," she cried, "there is only half an hour left to dress for breakfast."

At which Charles laughed, bade his beautiful mistress adieu for the nonce, and went up to find Arthur nearly dressed.

He was not quite so expansive as Charles, and could really wait until after breakfast before he feasted his eyes on the damsel of his soul.

"This sort of morning business, catching the early worm, you know," he said, "may do for milkmaids and shepherds, but I like to go down cool to my breakfast."

"How dare you call me a shepherd and Miriam a milkmaid?" asked Charles.

"So you have seen her?" continued Arthur; "thought so. But as I believe Maria to have more sense, I did not hurry.

"Well, I must say, except Norah and Miriam, there was no one about," said Charles, with an air of sleek complacency.

"I say, Charles," observed Denby, with an air of gravity, which, though unusual, became him well, "beware how you behave to Miss Fitzpatrick, and above all, do not call her Norah. She is a dear, impulsive girl, and, I fear, possesses a heart decidedly inflammable. She is a pure and tender flower."

"I say, Denby, what do you mean? You don't accuse me of such rascality as flirtation with one girl when I love and am engaged to another?" cried Charles, irately.

"I respect you too much, my dear Leicester, to suspect you of any such meanness," said Denby; but girls are so susceptible, and catch fire on the slightest pretense."

Charles muttered something, and went on with his toilet.

Charles, though seated at the father's request beside his eldest daughter, was rather raspish and petulant.

He felt that the eyes of both Miriam and Denby were upon him.

Still he was not impolite, and presently arousing himself, launched out into the description of some of his adventures in Paris and Germany.

Every one was amused, and shortly after, the meal being over, the ordinary guests departed, leaving only Charles and Denby.

Now, as ill-luck would have it, there had been present one of the most ardent admirers of Norah, a certain Don Reboso D'Alcantara,

Ever since his arrival, he had kept his eyes on Charles and Norah.

He was jealons at once, but the duet finished him, especially when, at the morning meal, the attache of the American Embassy sat in the place of honor.

As he rode out beside another caballero, he spoke.

"I wonder who those confounded Americans are!" he said.

"I can't make them out," replied the other, who was a candidate, rejected, for Di.

"Let us ride over to the marquis; his wards are here, and perhaps he may give us a hint about them; for aught we know, they may be some rascally adventurers, who have imposed upon the good colonel."

"*A Dios*," cried the other, and knocking their spurs into the sides of their horses, the two jealous lovers darted off in the direction of the hacienda of the marquis.

Meanwhile, utterly unconscious of the dangers and perils impending over their heads, the lovers had given themselves up to very different thoughts.

The girls retired to their private apartments as usual, for an hour or two in the morning, while Charles and Arthur remained with the colonel, who, as was the custom, at once began smoking, an indulgence in which the two gentlemen did not disdain to indulge.

"Colonel," said Charles, after a few premonitory whiffs, Indian fashion, "I have already explained to you the position in which we are placed. I and my friend here have determined at any price to marry the two charming girls who are now your guests."

"Willful boys will have their way," he answered. "I see only two difficulties, the opposition of the marquis, and the difference of religion."

"Colonel," said Charles, gravely, "you are an officer and a gentleman, and the archbishop bade us trust you wholly. There is no difference of religion. Like their mother, they are Protestants."

"And did his eminence know this?" asked the colonel, in a sad tone.

"Yes, on my honor," replied Charles.

"Then I have nothing more to say," he answered; "go on with your statement."

Charles then explained what he and Denby and the girls had thought of in regard to carrying off the mother, placing her under American protection, and then appealing to the laws.

"A bold and gallant, and yet desperate resolve, but still one of which I approve," said the colonel, warmly; "rely upon me to help you in every way that is possible."

"We counted on your noble heart," cried the two young men, shaking him by the hand heartily.

Then they went into plans and details, the result of which will be ultimately seen.

After the siesta, and just as there was some talk of a ride over the prairie, a domestic entered.

"The Marquis Di Trejico is at the gate, with his son and a large party," he said.

"Retire," whispered the master of the house, "and leave everything to me."

The young men left the apartment, and shortly after the marquis and his son entered to find the colonel and the four young girls seated around the traditional coffee urn, and looking as calm and collected as if nothing had happened.

"You ride early, marquis," said the Irishman, when the first courtesies had been exchanged.

"I thought my wards might be a burden to you," replied the wily Mexican, who had met the young men on their way to his residence.

Casually they had spoken of the presence of the two Americans.

Purple with rage, the marquis had questioned them, and been convinced that he had been pursued into the wilds of Sonora by these persevering lovers.

He determined, however, to dissemble, and both he and his son arranged to keep secret the discovery they had made.

Colonel Fitzpatrick was keenly alive to the marquis' character.

He was certain that he came with a motive.

"My dear marquis, here are four young ladies who have not met for more than a year, and you wish to part them at once. Impossible, my dear sir. They have laid out plans for at least a week. Weary of them! You don't know me. Girls, go to your music, and send us in wine and cigars," he added.

The girls laughingly obeyed.

The marquis and his son exchanged glances.

The colonel was in too high a position to be offended.

The Mexicans were therefore compelled by all the rules of civil etiquette to yield, and did so with an affectation of satisfaction which was cleverly put on.

Both agreed to stop the night, returning to the hacienda the next day.

"I will bring your girls back safe and sound at the end of the week," said the colonel, heartily; "they will come to no harm while in my custody."

There was much significance in the way these words were said.

The marquis bit his lip.

He knew as well as possible that all his scheming rascality was known to the colonel as if he had told him so himself.

But he must bide his time.

He was resolved that, once the girls were again in his custody, no scruples should restrain him.

If he carried them off bodily to Texas with their mother, he would crush their spirit.

He knew well that only as their husbands could he and his son enjoy their fortunes.

Wine, cigars and monte passed away the time until dinner.

Meanwhile, in a distant part of the house in a cool and pleasant room, Charles and Denby were seated in company with four girls.

The latter played, and sang, and chattered until they were summoned to join the dinner table, while the disconsolate Americans remained to be entertained by the major-domo.

"Confounded bore," said Denby. "I wish we could give those fellows a cowhiding."

"If we can only carry off the girls with their mother," answered Charles.

"Fine," continued the young man, "only it will be a deuce of a race. We must gain a day on the rascals."

Charles knew this, and knew also that they must have a goodly escort.

But he had doubted not that, on a pinch they would find a friend in the excellent colonel.

It was very far from satisfactory to be immured in a distant part of the building, while the fair girls, whom they loved, were in the society of their rivals and deadly foes.

But both the young men, knowing that the self-sacrifice was inevitable, bore up against depression, and were presently rewarded for their pains.

They were joined by the young ladies.

Several gentlemen had called, and monte being proposed—a game which often led to high words, and was generally made the excuse for drinking—the females gladly withdrew.

It was late when, at a hint from Norah, who was *de facto* the mistress of the house, the lovers parted.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE MAN OF ALL WORK.

THE apartments occupied by the young Americans, consisting of a large, double bedded room, and ante-chamber and dressing-room, were at some distance from the general dwelling.

It was a sort of pavilion, connected to the main house by means of a passage.

They enjoyed perfect liberty, and could step out into the garden without going through the main dwelling.

They were compelled next day to breakfast alone.

The marquis and his son, after appearing to yield to the wishes of the colonel, were to take their departure that day.

While they were conversing over the pleasant morning meal, a shadow darkened the window.

Looking up, they saw their faithful attendant, Watson.

He was dressed Mexican fashion, and looked rather comical in consequence.

"Come in," said Charles; "any news?"

"Well, sir; yes, sir. That there rascally Maffei, the marquis' man, has been a pumping away in the kitchen," he answered.

"Pumping what?" asked Charles, dryly.

"All about you, sir," continued Watson.

"And what did he learn?" added Charles.

"Not much. I'm a bit of a favorite down stairs, and a nod was as good as a wink to the girls. I gave 'em a hint to say you were two Englishmen."

"And did he believe them?" quietly demanded Denby.

"I don't know, but I should advise you to keep precious close, as he's a prowling about," answered Watson.

"All right; pull down the blind, and keep a watch on the fellow," ssid his master.

Watson obeyed, pulled down the blind so that no one could see in from without, and then glided out as cautiously as he had come in.

As he did so, he had just time to see the form of Maffei disappearing in a thicket in company with one of the female domestics.

Maffei, on the previous night, had obtained certain information that there were two visitors in the house, who for some reason or other were living in seclusion.

Several of the servants, who knew him well, had unsuspiciously satisfied him on this point; but when he came to demand further particulars, he found a general disinclination to satisfy him.

But how far Maffei was deceived we shall presently see.

He went into his master's room with such necessaries for his toilet as were required before breakfast, and found the marquis already up.

"Well, have you found anything out?" was the eager demand.

"*Si*, senor, two men—white men, are hid in the house," replied the domestic. "The servants, who seem all in league with the strangers, tell me they are Englishmen."

"Of course you know better; but have you seen them?" asked the marquis.

"No, not yet."

"*Demonio*, there is indeed some rascality going on—and yet," he added, as his son rolled out of the bed, where he had been listening to the conversation, "what have we to fear? As long as we have our hostage there is no harm can be done."

"But what are these fellows doing up here?" asked the son; "I tell you that unless we can rid ourselves of these leeches, something disagreeable will happen."

"What can be done? Colonel Fitzpatrick is evidently in league with them," urged the marquis.

"I am sure of it!" cried the count; "the whole is a conspiracy to defraud us of the girls and their fortunes, under which I am not prepared to sit contented."

"Nor I," said the marquis, gloomily; "but we must act with great caution and circumspection. The colonel is a dangerous man to offend."

"I know he is, but yet it is impossible that things can go on as they are," responded the count. "I suppose they go out sometimes?"

"They have been out ostrich hunting and are very fond of a gallop on the prairies," replied Maffei.

"Look you here, Maffei," said the viscount, in a low, hushed tone, "while these men live, while they haunt us, you know in what danger we are. The terrible secret cannot be forever kept—the secret that you know of; should the madame die an investigation would take place, and where should we be?"

"Where?" replied Maffei, with a grin.

"You know Rafael Mendez?" continued the viscount.

"I do," was the dry response.

"Well, find him; he is surely to be picked out, and let him know this—that for the destruction of those two men there is a hundred ounces to be earned."

Maffei held out his hand.

The count shrugged his shoulders, and pointed to his father.

"What do you want, picaro?" said the latter.

"Something on account, and then consider the thing done," was the reply.

The marquis put his hand in his pocket, took out a purse and handed it to a servant.

"The rest when the work is done," he significantly remarked; "and now to finish our toilet."

Presently the marquis and his son entered the breakfast-room with as much calmness as if they had not been plotting two deliberate murders.

They found the don and the girls waiting for them.

But something had occurred in the meantime of which they had no suspicion.

Charles Leicester had written a note to the colonel, saying that their presence was known to the marquis, and that hence concealment was useless.

The colonel had seen them, and immediately after Charles, Arthur and some peons had gone out for a morning ride.

The girls expected their return every moment, and were rather anxious about the matter.

Presently there was a loud ringing of the outer bell, and then a clatter of horses' hoofs.

The major-domo entered and said the senors had returned, and would pay their respects to the colonel and ladies.

The marquis and his son exchanged a rapid glance.

Picturesquely dressed in the Mexican hunting costume, Charles and Arthur entered, and walking up to the colonel, shook hands, bowing with ceremonious politeness to the ladies.

"I believe," said the colonel, affably, with a bow to the Mexicans and another to the two Americans, "you gentlemen have met before?"

"We have," replied the marquis, dryly, "and I am surprised to find officials of the American embassy so far from headquarters."

"The love of sport," observed Charles Leicester, accepting the seat offered and a cup of chocolate from the fair hand of Norah; "we have heard much of the game up in these quarters."

"You will find plenty of what you call sport," replied the marquis, "when you have exhausted the resources of our friend the don, perhaps you may try the Hacienda Almeda. It is famous for its American tigers."

"So I have heard," said Charles, in the most unconcerned tone, but with a look which had a word of meaning in it.

The swarthy countenance of the marquis reddened, and a sharp answer might have followed but for the interposition of the colonel.

"As we make up so large a party, suppose we have out Sebastian, and try our fortune in the woods. There have been panthers seen within an hour's ride."

"With all my heart," said Charles.

"At your service," replied the marquis, rising. "I will go and prepare."

And he and his son retired hurriedly.

"Gentleman," observed the colonel, gravely, "beware how you act. That man is dangerous, but he is my guest and so are his wards. Did I not know how bad a man he is and how wretched would be the fate of these girls in his hands, I dared not violate hospitality as I am doing. But above all, beware."

"My dear sir, for their sakes as well as our own, we shall be careful," said Charles, gayly. "I and Arthur here are not afraid."

"But," observed the punctilious Irish gentleman, "above all, do not exchange hot words while you are in my house. I am bound to treat all my guests with equal consideration. I suppose you girls will be coming?"

It required no second question.

It was a bright cavalcade which issued from the gates of the ranch.

The marquis and his son were outwardly very jubilant and showed no outward signs of vexation.

A slightly triumphant gleam in their eyes might have been accounted for by a very simple fact.

Ten minutes before the party issued forth, a mounted Mexican might have been seen disappearing toward the south.

He rode with desperate and hot haste, and soon disappeared behind some willows that skirted a small stream.

It was Maffei on his errand of crime.

Unconscious of any danger, the greater number of the party gave themselves up to the happiness of the moment.

The colonel rode before with the marquis and his son, whom he engaged in earnest conversation.

Charles Leicester rode with Miriam on one side and Norah on the other, and like a true gentleman, without any respect to his secret and private feelings, divided his conversation pretty fairly between them.

Being tall and admirably well proportioned, and riding like a centaur or an English fox hunter, his picturesque costume became him well, and his lady companions, in their inmost hearts, thought that they had never seen so splendid-looking a hero.

Strange that the feelings of Norah, so carefully kept under maidenly restraint, were a complete secret to Charles Leicester.

He had not the remotest, the faintest suspicion of what passions were raging within her gentle heart.

But Miriam was not so blind.

She saw as clearly as the girl what was going on in her bosom, but as yet it may be truly said that the knowledge only occasioned sorrow on Norah's own acount.

Denby, more light-hearted than Charles, took charge of Maria and Di, entertaining them in his laughing way.

In front of the whole party went Sebastian, the guide, while the rear was kept up by a large party of peons and hunters.

Several of these were scattered over the plain, looking out for the track of animals worthy of their steel.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE HUNT.

A TWO hours' ride brought them to a rather wild spot; a number of rocky hills of some extent surrounded on all sides by a belt of forest, which stretched far away into the interior of the land.

The peons at once erected a large tent for their master's guests, and the men of the party alighting, took their guns, and prepared, under the guidance of Sebastian, to enter the wood.

Several well-trained dogs accompanied the hunters.

Some shepherds who had suffered much from the destructive proclivities of the panthers had tracked them to their lair.

Charles followed the game closely, with Watson at his side.

Denby was nearer at hand, with the colonel and his Mexican guests at no great distance.

In this way they came to a gloomy, wild spot, where a number of trees were closely intertwined over some running water.

A growl from the dogs indicated that they were aware of the presence of game.

A roar, something between that of the lion and the mewing of a wild cat, indicated the position occupied by the panther, which next instant was seen on a bough, with two of its young by its side.

Charles, his color heightened, being in advance of all the others, took steady aim and fired at the unfortunate beast, just as it took a leap at the party of hunters.

He fired, we have said, but another shot was fired at the same time, and there lay, it is true, the tiger cat in the agonies of death, but there also lay Charles Leicester on his back, to all appearances dead.

"My God!" said Denby, wildly, "who fired that shot?"

And he looked around eagerly at every one of the hunters.

The colonel was conversing at some distance with the marquis and viscount, and all three were leaning on their guns.

Denby put his gun on the ground, and stooped over his unfortunate friend.

He tore off his poncho, opened his tunic and found a wound in his breast.

All crowded around.

"Give him air!" cried the distracted young man. "For the love of Heaven, does any one understand surgery?"

"Stand back, all," said the colonel, fiercely, "stand back, all. Let some search the woods; this is a cold-blooded and savage assassination. A hundred ounces for the murderer; he will be known by his empty gun."

The peons and hunters dispersed in all directions.

"I am something of a doctor," said the colonel, as he leaned over the livid face of the wounded man, and felt his pulse; "he is dangerously wounded. Let us stanch the blood, and then bear him to the tent."

"Will he die?" gasped Denby.

"I can say nothing," replied the colonel; "some vile, foul play has been at work here," he added, fiercely and angrily. "But there, you, Sebastian, are good at wounds; bind this up carefully."

The man, an experienced hunter, stooped and examined the wound.

As he did so, he shook his head, but made no remark.

As the shot was fired, Wilson darted away to a spot where he had seen the smoke of a gun.

He now returned, and stood over his master.

"There was some rascal in ambush yonder," he whispered to Denby. "I should very much like this minute to know the whereabouts of Maffei."

Denby's eyes flashed with unwonted fire.

"Keep a good lookout, my man," he said, in a fierce tone; "this foul crime shall not go unpunished."

All this time Charles Leicester lay wholly insensible; except for a slight, almost inaudible moaning, he might have been dead.

The Mexican hunter soon, however, stanched the wound, and one of the hunters producing a flask of very choice brandy, a little was forced between his set and clinched teeth.

By the orders of the colonel, a litter was being made of leaves and branches.

All the hunters and peons brought in the same report.

Not any sign was to be seen of the assassin or assassins, though at one time voices were heard at no great distance under cover of the woods.

But though several stole up carefully in the direction thus indicated, no trace of the villains could be found.

The insensible form of one who, a few minutes before, had stood erect, a perfect specimen of youthful and manly beauty, was now lifted on to the litter, and being carried by six strong and lithe Mexicans, the sad procession set out.

The marquis and the count had made few remarks beyond inveighing against the folly and madness of inexperienced sportsmen, and they now walked behind the cortege at some little distance.

The colonel and Denby walked close to the head of their unfortunate friend.

"I cannot make it out," observed the warm-hearted Irishman. "I cannot conceive how such an unfortunate accident could have occurred."

"My dear sir," said Denby, "it was no accident. Where is Maffei, the confidential servant of the marquis?"

"But," urged the colonel.

"It is not the first time the wretch has attempted to murder my friend," continued the young nobleman. "Should my friend die, I shall hold them answerable."

"You horrify me," answered the Irishman.

"They knew we were in the house, and just before we left for the hunting party, the rascal Maffei was missed. But what is to be done? We approach the tents."

"*Madre de Dios!*" cried Colonel Fitzpatrick, bursting out into a regular Mexican cry, "what shall we do? Shall I go forward, or will you?"

"I will go," said Denby, sadly; "I never did and I never will flinch from duty."

Upon which he hurried forward, reaching the tent before any of its inmates caught sight of the gloomy procession.

The day was hot, and the four girls were seated in the shadowed recess of the canvas habitation.

The young man entered abruptly.

Something in his manner was contagious.

The girls leaped to their feet, and approached him hurriedly.

"What is the matter?" they cried, with one voice.

"Dear Miriam," he said, taking her hand, "be calm and brave. You will want all your nerve."

"Charles!" she gasped, while Norah put her hand upon her heart, and leaned, white and shivering against the tent pole.

"Is wounded. While killing a panther, he was shot at in some unaccountable manner."

"He is not dead?" she asked, in that unnaturally calm tone which women sometimes have strength to assume.

"No; and there is every hope. But he must have extreme quiet. Hark! here they come," he continued.

All the girls were spellbound with grief and astonishment, but on the face of Norah was a look of fixed horror, which the others were too excited to perceive, while Miriam seemed to gather up all her strength to do her duty by the sick man, who had given her his whole heart and young affections.

There seemed a kind of strange belief in her mind that he would die, leaving her solitary and bereaved in a world of shadow and sorrows.

All stood back reverently as the bearers brought in the motionless body.

Not a word was spoken until the domestics had retired, and then Miriam turned to the colonel, and spoke.

"Will he die?" she said, in a dreamy kind of way.

Neither the marquis nor the count had made any attempt to enter the tent.

"We commend him to the mercy of God. In the first place, we must send for Father Sanchez, who is as good a doctor as I know; then, Norah, for your traveling litter with the mules. All this will take time, so that we must pass the night here. It will not be necessary for you girls to remain."

"I shall remain," said Miriam quietly, "he is my affianced husband."

"I shall sleep with my sister," added Maria.

"We cannot leave our guests," put in Norah, rather timidly.

"Willful girls will have their way," said the colonel, kindly. "I will go and send off the messengers."

"What think you of him?" asked the marquis, as the colonel went out.

"He is as bad as he can be," replied the colonel, dryly, "and cannot be moved. I have sent for the good Father Sanchez, and he will decide."

"Had we not better relieve you of our wards?" asked the marquis, in continuation.

"Your ward, Miriam," said the colonel, dryly, "has just told me that she is this young man's affianced wife, and that she intends to remain and nurse him."

"*Demonios!*" cries the marquis, furiously; "what means this monstrous folly? The girl must be taught that she is my ward."

And he moved toward the tent with a fierce and angry countenance.

"Pardon me," said the colonel, standing immediately before him, "my sick guest cannot be disturbed. A quarrel just now will be unseemly. To-morrow you can come and claim your wards, but over the body of a dying man I can have no squabbling."

The marquis bit his lip.

It is true, the words "dying man" rather soothed his feelings, and he reflected that one of them out of the way, the other could easily be got rid of.

"I will not intrude just now," he haughtily observed; "but to-morrow shall come for my wards. In the meantime, *addois*."

And, joining his son, the marquis rode off, mingled joy and hatred in his heart.

The colonel, having sent off swift and trusty messengers, returned to where Denby was standing motionless over the body of his friend.

There was much stertorous breathing, and the face was livid, but once or twice there was a faint opening of the eye, and an attempt to speak.

This was at once checked by Denby, who took his friend's hand.

"Do not speak, on your life," he said, close to his ear. "You are surrounded by friends, and the doctor is at hand. When he comes, we will hear what you have to say."

There was a faint pressure, and yet the lips tried to move.

The girl, too, was leaning over him, and like a phantom whisper came the word "Miriam."

"She is here," was the answer, and again the fingers closed upon hers, and quiet reigned.

A bed had been hastily erected for the colonel and Denby.

Night fell, and it was arranged that two of the young and beautiful nurses should be watchers at a time.

Except moisten his lips, they could do nothing.

Thus the hours passed, Denby walking up and down smoking.

The colonel lay at length in his tent doing the same; presently he arose.

"Horses approaching," he said. "Peons and hunters, be on the look-out."

His orders were obeyed, and soon there came dashing in one of the hunters, to say that the priest and major-domo were at hand with the mules and the litter.

Five minutes elapsed, and then Father Sanchez entered the tent.

"Leave me," he said, gently, to the women, and as soon as they were out, prepared, with the assistance of the major-domo, to partially strip the patient, taking off his bandages, and examining him keenly.

"Well?" asked the colonel.

"A very dangerous wound," said the priest, as he deftly extracted the ball; "but I fancy no really vital part is touched. Great care, quiet, and nursing are needed," he added.

The advice of the worthy priest was taken in every way, and all having been done that could be, the camp resumed its peaceful attitude.

The four girls were once more the watchers of the sick man, while the priest joined the colonel and Denby.

"How did it happen, my friends?" asked the worthy priest.

The colonel related all he knew.

"But, was it not an accident?" urged the priest.

"No," replied Denby, emphatically. "I have a strong conviction that the Marquis of Trejico is at the bottom of the matter."

The priest looked surprised, and Colonel Fitzpatrick at once put him in possession of the main facts of the case.

The priest, who, though to a certain extent a prejudiced man, was perfectly honest, could not conceal his horror and disgust.

"It is a terrible charge to bring against any one," he said, "but I have reason to believe the person you speak of capable of any desperate deed. You must be on the watch."

Denby told him he should be for the future, while, should anything happen to his friend, he was determined that the marquis and his son should be visited with condign punishment.

"Be careful," replied the priest, gravely; "it is not for me fully to explain, but circumstances are known to me which make me wish you would leave this part of the country as soon as possible."

"Can you give me no hint?" asked Denby.

"Your friend's attempted assassination was doubtless the work of some of the robbers of the prairies, who are at the disposal of any man who has money. The sooner you are out of their reach, the better."

In the morning Charles Leicester was still very weak, and, though conscious of what was going on around him, unable to speak.

It was determined to pass the whole day on the spot, so

as not to move during the noontide heats, and then to take their departure for the hacienda.

Two of the girls remained in constant attendance, to minister to his wants, and mark the slightest change in his manner and looks.

Miriam made no pretense of concealing her sorrow, and could scarcely be persuaded to leave him for one moment.

The absence of the marquis and his son, who had so opportunely taken their departure, was a source of great gratification.

Norah generally accompanied her, but she was forced to restrain her feelings within bounds, and not for worlds would she have betrayed the weary state of grief and sorrow into which she had fallen since the accident.

About an hour before sundown the priest declared that his patient might be removed, and he having been placed in a litter slightly slung between two mules that walked with a care and steadiness indicative of a knowledge of their important task, the procession started.

The whole party rode slowly, the girls forming the particular escort of the sick man, and in this way about midnight they reached the hacienda, where Charles was removed to his room and handed over to the priest and some of the more experienced women of the establishment.

It was about twelve o'clock next day, and just when Miriam and Norah were about to visit the sick man, that the marquis came in search of his wards.

"You cannot want them while you have a sick house," he said, "and so I came to relieve you of them."

"My dear marquis," replied the colonel, with grave urbanity, "the house must be kept quiet; we can receive no visitors," he significantly added, "and Norah and Di would be very dull without your charming wards."

The marquis bit his lip.

"You are very good; they can remain until Saturday, on which day I will relieve you of their presence," said the marquis.

"Say Monday," responded the urbane Irishman; "Sunday is a great day with the senoras."

And so the matter was finally settled, the marquis retiring with rage in his heart, and vowing that never again should the artful colonel entrap him in the way he had done.

There were some crumbs of comfort under the circumstances, however.

Charles Leicester might die after all, and the girls, though in the society of their lovers, would not dare to act

in defiance of his wishes, while he retained possession of that sacred hostage, their mother.

"By Heaven!" said his son, "we have dilly-dallied long enough. We must make an end of the matter."

"You are right. I will steel my heart to every other consideration," replied his father, "and make these rebellious girls yield. But they must be removed to where none of their friends can turn up to thwart our plans."

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## CHAPTER XX.

### THE RIVAL NURSES.

CHARLES LEICESTER lay on a fragrant bed, provided with everything that could tend to his ease and comfort.

When Denby paid him a visit during the stay of the marquis in the house, he found that he was apparently much improved.

"Miriam?" asked Charles.

"Is down-stairs, and as soon as that old shark of a guardian of hers has taken his departure, will doubtless pay you a visit," continued the young man.

"He here!" gasped Charles.

"Never fear, the colonel will not allow them to depart."

"Who is that?" ejaculated Charles.

"I have come," said Norah, showing herself at the head of the bed, "to administer some refreshment by the priest's orders."

A slight shade of disappointment came over his face, which the girl was not slow to perceive.

It went to her heart, but she allowed nothing of it to be seen, making way slightly so that he could perceive the presence of Miriam.

She was pale, anxious, and yet when his eyes were fixed with earnest love upon her face, she could not restrain a slight blush.

"Papa wants your presence for the midday meal," said Norah, to Denby; "we will take care of your patient."

"Much better than I could. In the sick-room men are but bears," he said.

The young man hastened away, hoping to be repaid for his self-denial by enjoying the society of his beloved Maria.

Denby found the two young ladies awaiting him with the colonel.

The meal was dispatched, upon which the colonel went off in search of that sleep which had become a necessity of life.

"Will you imitate my father?" said Di, with a smile, "for of course you know that he has gone for his nap."

"No, if you ladies will keep me company," was the gallant reply.

"I will answer for myself," continued Di, with an arch look at Maria, "but must leave you to the society of the Senora Lasso, while I give some orders."

And merrily she tripped from the room.

"What do you think of Mr. Leicester?" asked Maria, as soon as they were alone.

"He is progressing favorably," replied Denby, "but it will be some time before he will be able to move, which gives your guardian a great advantage over us."

"In what way?" she asked.

"Rely upon it, a man so desperate as the marquis, who is at the bottom of this foul assassination, will lose no time. Now that he knows we are in the land, he will have less scruples than ever," he continued; "as long as you are in his power there is everything to fear."

"We have so many friends," she urged.

"But he will soon find means to transport you elsewhere," he added; "still, if you and Miriam will have determined courage, all may yet be well."

"We will never yield, not even to force," said Maria, firmly.

"Bravely spoken," answered Denby; "but now, as to what is to be done when Charles is convalescent. Will your mother agree to fly with us and you, and seek protection?"

"She will do anything that is for the interest and service of her daughters," replied Maria.

And after some further discussion of their plans they reverted to one of those conversations which, however agreeable to the parties concerned, is of no moment to the general reader.

Charles Leicester, though deeply grateful for the presence of Miriam, was not in a fit state to speak.

But then, lying there, he could hear her speak, listen to the sweet music of her voice, and drink in deep draughts of love.

He could feel the gentle touch of her fingers, as she softly raised his head, to enable Norah to smooth his pillow.

Little did Charles Leicester think of what a sad tragedy, so to speak, was going on there.

He loved Miriam, and knew that she had lavished on him the rich treasures of her affections, but he little suspected that one even more gentle, more refined, and to some minds more winning even than Miriam, had cast her love upon the waters with little hope of its returning after many or few days.

Miriam scarcely ever took her eyes off the sufferer, but when she did so, it was with sincere sorrow that she occasionally caught a glimpse of an expression on Norah's countenance which was scarcely to be misunderstood.

It was pained, yearning, yet so sweet and loving, that Miriam felt sorry for her.

How she would have liked to have taken her to her heart and tried to comfort her, but reserve and maidenly modesty forbade all reference to the delicate subject, and Miriam was constrained to think and not speak.

She could not hope to remain long in the house with Charles, whose convalescence would take time; and, when she took her departure, who but Norah would have the pleasure, the pleasant duty, of nursing him?

A hot, jealous pain went to her very heart as she thought of this.

She glanced at Norah, and every charm of her beauty seemed to imprint itself upon her brain.

She did not believe Charles to be either fickle or treacherous; but, placed under such circumstances, under such seductive influences, could he help being led away to disloyalty?

Miriam became angry with herself as these thoughts filled her mind, and she dismissed them with promptitude.

But the sentiment is one which is so treacherous and deceptive that she found it coming back every now and then with increased energy.

About this time the priest entered and walked slowly to the bedside of the patient.

He examined him keenly as he slept, and when he awoke, looked at his tongue and felt his pulse.

Miriam watched him with gleaming and anxious eyes, and as he left the bedside, after some kindly words to the sick man, followed him into the passage.

"Well, father," she asked, in a rather cool and abrupt way, "what of him?"

"He is doing as well as a man could be expected to do under the circumstances," he said, gently, "and I believe, unless some evil turn appears, will recover to a certainty."

"Will it be a long illness?" she continued.

"He will scarcely leave his room under a month," he retorted, "but then, probably, he will be quite recovered."

"Thank you," she said, with a low and courteous bow, as she turned to re-enter the room. "A month, and I shall not be here. He will be alone with her."

It was indeed a terrible pang, one which became additionally acute as she remarked how Norah was shifting his pillow at this moment, with what gentleness and tender care.

She approached rather abruptly.

"He asked for you, Miriam," she deprecatingly observed, "but I told him you were out of the room. I am not so good a nurse as you are; but I try my best."

"You are both admirable," he said, in a low tone, "and I thank you from my heart. It is pitiable for a man to lie here so utterly helpless at the mercy of any, but when there is such kindness shown, it is almost tempting."

And again silence fell upon the scene until the girls were summoned away, and a nurse girl took their place.

The dinner was rather a silent and dull affair, and it was not until it was over that the colonel referred to the visit of the marquis and his strict demand for their return on Monday.

Miriam's face fell.

"Must we really go?" she asked, quite pitifully, for one so proud.

"I really cannot venture to resist your guardian any longer," the colonel kindly remarked.

"But I should have liked to be sure of Mr. Leicester's convalescence," she answered, blushing.

"He will have every care, and both Norah and Di can ride over and give you information," said the colonel.

"I have no doubt of his receiving every care and attention," said Miriam, with some little spirit, "but he is my betrothed, and I am naturally anxious."

"Of course you are, my brave, good girl," retorted the colonel; "but, rely upon it, he will be safe."

"Safer than under the roof of the marquis," retorted Norah, a little vexed.

"I know," said Miriam, reproaching herself bitterly for her implied injustice; "I know that he could nowhere be safer than here, but I am anxious. I have revealed all the secrets of my heart to you," she whispered, "and I love him."

"You are my friend, Miriam," said Norah, with considerable dignity; "and he shall be held a sacred charge. You shall hear of every change, and I will bring you messages from him. Will that satisfy you, *exigeante* and jealous one?"

Miriam blushed to the eyes.

She knew well by the tone in which Norah spoke that she did not use the word jealous in its comprehensive or rather jealous sense, but rather in a pettish, reproachful way.

"Were I placed in the ordinary position of a girl engaged to be married to the man of my choice, my dear Norah," said Miriam, gravely, "I should speak and act differently. But I am beset by foes—by base, treacherous,

and cruel foes. My mother is hostage for my conduct, and the future is so dark and clouded."

They had retired during this coversation to an alcove, where they spoke, concealed by curtains.

As Miriam finished, she cast herself in the other's arms and wept bitterly.

Norah, much moved, pressed her to her bosom and tried to comfort her.

"Miriam," said the brave girl, "you have trusted me, and you will not find me unworthy of your trust. I will be your friend, your sister, and if necessary, will prove it —by being faithful unto death."

Little did Norah know the force of what she was saying.

"I believe you," said Miriam, wiping her eyes, "and will trust you with Charles as with myself."

They now returned to the rest of the company.

When the hour came to separate, the girls went in a deputation to the sick-room, where they found Wilson seated beside his master's bed.

"You have been talking?" asked Denby, in some trepidation.

"Oh, no, sir. I only came in just to have a look at master," he said, rising; "and seems to me he's going on first-rate."

"All right, Wilson; thank you," replied Denby. "You can go now."

But the look of Wilson, as he approached the door, said, unmistakably: "Come," and the young man followed him

"Is there anything the matter, Wilson?" he asked.

"Well, sir, as I was riding out just now with a message for the priest, that is, the doctor, I see that there rascal Maffei enter a wood with one of the most truculent, ill-looking fellows you ever saw," he replied.

"Well?"

"They were so busy, they didn't see me; so, jumping off my horse, I followed——"

"Well done, Wilson. You cannot be too cautious in this country," cried Denby.

"I reached a spot from which I could see this house, and I then saw Maffei pointing here. The conversation that passed, as far as I could understand it, was:

"'What a fool you was to blunder so. Everything has to be done over again,' said Maffei.

"'*Da vero*,' replied the ill-looking rascal; 'it is true. How I made such a miss, I don't know.'

"'Well, be careful the next time, or you will lose my master forever as a friend,' was the reply."

"Wilson, you are as sensible as you are brave. Keep a

good look-out for Heaven's sake—chiefly during the night," he whispered.

Touching his hat, the man retired.

Denby returned to the sick-room, where he was to pass the night on a camp bedstead, in company with the Mexican nurse woman.

The sick man had taken his potion, and the girls were taking their leave.

Miriam was last, and all the others turned to speak to Denby while she said good-night.

"Good-night and happy dreams," she said, with affected light-heartedness.

"Darling," he whispered.

"Yes."

"Say good-night, Charles, dear?" he asked.

"Good-night, Charles, dear," she replied, in a most obedient tone.

"And now, oh, my darling! kiss me, and I shall have pleasant and happy dreams all the night," he added.

She stooped, her face suffused with blushes, which were a mixture of happiness and shame.

Charles had kissed her before, but she had never before been asked to kiss a man.

Yet she did it without a murmur, and felt no regret when the maidenly sacrifice was completed.

There was one who saw this by-play, and whose heart gave a great bound.

But she turned away with a great sigh, and more than ever resolved to be true and faithful unto death.

All retired after wishing Denby a good night's rest.

But he had no intention to take any sleep just yet.

There was a little side room in which he could sit without a light, and look out upon the grounds.

The words of the faithful and attached servant had made him extremely anxious, and he was resolved to watch carefully.

This room was on the same veranda as that occupied by Charles.

By closing the door, however, he could place it in complete darkness.

He, however, felt compelled to do something to keep himself awake, and therefore reverted to his usual cigar.

He lighted one, drew behind a curtain and watched.

Several times he tried his repeater, and the hours passed away.

Presently, becoming very impatient and rather sleepy, he again sounded the useful watch, and found it was two o'clock.

At that moment he saw a dark figure imerge from the

pine thicket which separated the lawn from the lower gardens.

It was a man wrapped in a poncho, and his face concealed by a flapping sombrero.

He stepped lightly and cautiously toward the balcony, on which anyone could leap with perfect ease.

He could make out nothing of his face.

Denby, however, noticed that in his hand shone a bright steel.

He felt for his revolver.

The man advanced across the green, and almost reached the veranda.

Denby put his hand upon the door handle as the man touched the balustrade of the veranda.

At the same moment a shot was fired, a blazing flash passed before his eyes, and with a wild cry, the man fell backwards.

Denby leaped out into the open air as some one rushed up.

"I've settled him, my lord," said the stern voice of Wilson, the valet.

Denby found a man, in the picturesque costume of the Mexican prairies, lying prone upon his face.

"What have you done?" whispered the young man.

Wilson approached to where the midnight assassin lay weltering in his blood, and turned him over.

"See," he said, pointing to the long, glittering knife which the other still clutched, and to the pistol in his belt.

"*Carajo!*" muttered the wounded man, in a low, hushed voice, "what does it mean? A priest, a priest."

There was a bustle in the garden now, and soon the colonel appeared, followed by several domestics, and as good fortune would have it, the priest himself.

"What is the matter?" said the host, with a troubled glance at the wounded man.

"This rascal," replied Denby, "was in the act of entering the sick chamber, when this honest fellow came on his track and fired."

"Mercy—mercy! a priest. I will tell all," muttered the wretched being on the ground.

"Stand on one side," said the priest, stooping to examine the wounds of the midnight marauder.

They were very severe, he could see at once, but not necessarily fatal.

Still the priest shook his head; having a very strong suspicion with regard to the man whom he was examining, he was careful not to arouse his hopes, but rather to play upon his fears.

"Shall I die?" gasped the wounded man, watching the

priest's face by the light of a torch carried by the startled peons.

"Life is not in our hands," said the priest. "What act of villainy were you about to commit? Remember that I know you as a bandit and a robber of the prairies."

"Kind sir, do not be hard on me," whined the man, "it is not my fault."

"Whose fault then, if not your own?" replied the priest sternly.

"The marquis; he told me he was only a heretic," answered the assassin.

"The marquis," was the stupefied cry of the colonel. "Villian, can this be?"

"Only a heretic," said one or two of the stupid and ignorant Mexicans, who from this point of view were inclined to sympathize with their countryman.

"Let him be taken into the house," exclaimed the priest, "The man is severely wounded, and may die here before he can make a full confession."

"That is for you," muttered the bandit.

"You have already mentioned your employer in public," replied the priest, coldly, "that you cannot withdraw. When you require the consolations of religion, I shall be prepared to give them."

The man was now carried into the house, secured in a room, and his wounds being dressed, left to the charge of two sturdy peons.

It was three hours past midnight.

"I think we had better all retire," said the colonel, quietly. "Things have become very serious, and I must think them over. If this fellow persists in his statement that he is a hired assassin employed by the marquis, I shall know what to do.

All acquiesced, and the party soon dispersed to their various couches.

The ladies, who had been aroused by the shot, were told by the domestics that a man had been fired at while trying to get into the house, and with this assurance, again retired to rest.

Denby and Wilson rejoined Charles Leicester, who was lying restless and uneasy on his bed.

"Well?" was all he could ejaculate.

Denby simply explained that a fellow armed in a suspicious way, had been found prowling under the window with a long, pointed knife in his hand, and had been shot at by Wilson and severely wounded.

Next morning, when the priest went around to see his patient, he found the guards lying in a state of stupor on the floor.

The prisoner had escaped.

It was impossible to understand in any way what had happened, and the two men, when they came to themselves, gave a very rambling account of what had taken place.

The man said he was parched, and one of them had gone to procure some drink.

While he was procuring some mild liquid for the sick man, he thought he might as well get something for himself.

What followed was very vague, indeed.

They began drinking, and suddenly found three strangers in the room.

These men forced them to drink a tumbler of strong pulque, after which they remembered nothing more.

One thing appeared to corroborate their story.

The mattress on which the wounded assassin had been placed was gone, as well as the poncho covering, proving that he had been carried off by some confederates, who, doubtless, had been concealed in the garden.

"This is unfortunate," said the colonel with a frown. "I had hoped, with that witness in my possession, to have coerced the marquis into resigning the custody of his wards."

"I will find him," cried the priest, dryly. "I have a clew to the haunt of the rascals; but, meanwhile, be calm, and let no suspicious words pass your lips."

This was agreed to, and when in the afternoon the marquis and his retinue came to fetch away Miriam and Maria, no opposition was offered to their departure.

Miriam contrived a short interview with Charles.

"You will be stanch and true?" he said, the color coming into his white and pallid cheeks. "You will not desert me?"

"Never," replied Miriam, gently; "only get well as soon as possible."

And though Norah was in the room, looking out of the window, she stooped rapidly, and imprinted a kiss upon his forehead.

He felt, too, more than one tear on his face, after which the young girl vanished.

"When I let you go to that fellow's house again," said the marquis, as soon as they were clear of the hacienda, "it shall do him good. 'Tis disgraceful for a man who calls himself a gentleman to harbor fortune-hunting heretics and adventurers."

"I wish senor marquis," replied Miriam, with a sneer, "that you were as honest and honorable a gentleman as the two Americans."

And she spurred her horse to the side of Maria, and kept aloof from her guardian for the rest of the day.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### ISOLATION.

MIRIAM and Maria, on their return to the hacienda, soon discovered that the marquis and his son had some plot or scheme in their heads.

They were relegated to apartments wholly away from the rest of the house, and were told that until further orders they were to receive no visitors.

"If that meddling fool of a colonel attempts to force his way hither," said the marquis, in his most scornful tones, "I will have the outer gate shut in his face."

"He will arouse the indignation of the whole province," replied Miriam sharply.

"Girl!" cried the other, with a dark and gloomy frown, "do not try to defy me. I'm determined—with or without your consent—you will be my wife; and if you don't agree, remember how wholly you are in my power." He continued: "I have important business to transact—business in connection with your fortune—and shall be one fortnight absent. But my orders will be strict—no visitors, no visiting. You will be watched—your every step dogged, and any want of obedience will be punished."

With these words he went out, leaving Miriam cold and impenetrable.

Maria was with her mother, and she was, therefore, for a short time alone.

There was something preying upon her mind which she refused to make known even to her dear confederate and friend, her sister Maria.

"And I must remain here, cooped up in a prison—the inmate of a cell—while Norah is by his side, speaking to him with her sweet, seductive voice," she cried, aloud.

And then the tempest of passion was relieved by a sudden flood of tears.

After a while her feelings more composed, she went to join her mother and sister.

The marchioness, who, despite her forty years of age, was a singularly handsome woman, received her daughter with her usual sweet smile.

Treachery and oppression had set their seal upon her.

But still, not wholly deprived of her children, she had borne up with great courage against the fiendish tyrant who ruled her household with a rod of iron.

It was to her inexplicable that her husband should have left her and her children to the guardianship of a

half-brother, for whom he had never cared, and whom, during his life, he had treated with singular coolness, if not aversion.

The marquis had been killed during one of the many revolutionary risings of the state, and been buried far away from his wife and children.

The Marquis Trejico, who brought the news, also brought with him that which had made him guardian of the widow and her children.

It was a strange and very unexpected act on the part of the marquis; but the marchioness was not one to dispute the will and pleasure of her dead husband.

"Well, my Miriam," she said, "why so sad and gloomy? Your gallant knight is recovering, I am told by Maria."

"He is; but I cannot see him."

"Why not? It is not forbidden to call upon the young ladies?" urged the mother.

"It is. The marquis has gone on one of those mysterious journeys, from which he always returns so haggard and pale, and he has left orders that, under no pretense whatever, are we to leave the hacienda. The servants have strict orders to restrain us," she answered.

"And shall we submit to this vile, this atrocious tyranny?" cried Maria.

"My children," said the marchioness, earnestly, "it is quite clear your guardian is getting desperate. The money is yours—and your father left his whole fortune to you two, save a nominal sum to him at my death—and if he cannot force you into this unnatural marriage, he is probably a ruined man. Any other suitors would ask some account of his stewardship, and of this he is afraid."

"What is to be done?" asked Miriam.

"Escape while he is away," she answered; "it is our only hope. Once let him get us into America, and you have no mother. He will carry out his fiendish threat, and I am lost to you forever."

"Escape!" said Miriam, with a vivid blush upon her pallid cheek. "How—where?"

"Could we but throw ourselves on the protection of the law, all would be well," the mother continued. "I am sure, could I see the colonel, he would help me."

Miriam remained silent some moments.

Then she spoke.

"The marquis is about to leave. He has given orders that we are to be kept in strict confinement, and not allowed to leave our own apartments," she said; "but we must outwit him. Naomi is faithful and devoted, and with her help I will leave the house and ride over to the colonel's. He cannot refuse to come and hear you."

"And his high position gives an authority next only to the governor of the province," continued the marchioness. "He must, he shall do me justice. I have suffered this injury long enough."

A somewhat long discussion ensued, and then it was resolved that Miriam should take an early opportunity of paying a secret visit to the residence of the colonel.

It was with deep satisfaction that Miriam laid her plans.

Not only would she be able to take her mother's message, but would she not see him?

In the evening Miriam called to her favorite attendant Naomi.

She was originally the child of a slave mother and father, but nad been manumitted by the late marquis, and created into the position of personal attendant on Miriam.

To her she was deeply devoted, and on many occasions had shown her readiness to serve her.

Naomi was young, pretty, active, and about the same height as her mistress.

"Naomi," said the young lady, with a smile, "I want you to render me a very great service."

The girl's eyes sparkled.

"Anything my mistress wishes," she said.

"Now, Naomi," replied Miriam, "you must be very careful. You are aware that my guardian has prohibited me not only from leaving the house, but from meeting any of my friends?"

Naomi stared with her great, speaking eyes.

"The major-domo has orders to keep us in strict seclusion," continued Miriam, "and all the servants who wait on us are to take his orders and report to him what we are doing."

"But what does it mean, senorita?" asked the astonished girl.

"It would be too long to explain," said Miriam, quietly; "but this is what I want you to do. You are," she said, with a sickly smile, "rather a favorite with Don Jose, the major-domo?"

"Well, he does me the honor to make love to me," laughed Naomi; "but I can't bear his yellow face."

"I suppose, if you wished to go into the town, and asked him to lend you a horse, he would let you have it?" asked Miriam.

"I think I could manage it," replied Naomi.

"Do so, then, after breakfast to-morrow. Then come to me; we will change clothes, and you shall remain in seclusion with my mother and sister while I am absent," she continued. "I shall return as early as possible."

"It shall be done," said Naomi.

"Bring your best clothes to my room to-night," added Miriam; "and don't forget your large reboso—that will wholly conceal my face."

And she went up to inform her mother and sister of what she had done.

Like all Mexican girls of her age and class, Naomi was a finished coquette.

The major-domo was one of those middle-aged men who believe themselves complete Adonises, and able to win the most heart-whole of girls.

Naomi knew where to find my gentleman, who was steward, major-domo, butler, all in one.

He had entire command of the household, and reigned supreme in the absence of his master.

Naomi found him in his own room, lounging in an American easy chair, smoking his cigarette and sipping pulque, a duality of occupation which was almost too much for his nerves.

Naomi gave him a flash of her black and speaking eyes, that went to the very heart of Senor Don Jose.

"And to what do I owe the honor and pleasure of this visit?" he said, gallantly.

"To the state of my wardrobe," she replied, with a laughing smile. "My mistress has just paid me my wages, and I hear that Andreas has some new rebosos and some fine dresses from Mexico city itself."

"Well?" said the steward.

"I want you to-morrow," she continued, "to lend me a horse, and let me go to make some purchases. I know my way—unless, indeed, you like to show it me," she added, with a very wicked dart from her black eyes.

Now, she knew full well that, under the circumstances, the steward dared not leave the hacienda.

"I am sorry," he began, "I cannot go; but of course you can have a horse. Mind you take care of yourself. Such good people as you are scarce."

And he handed her a glass of choice wine.

It was then arranged that, at twelve precisely, the horse should be ready, and Naomi allowed to go on her shopping expedition.

Now, neither Miriam or Naomi were without their fears and their doubts.

Don Jose was a very cunning, shrewd, and unscrupulous man, and he would not be easily deceived.

"You must try and laugh as I do," said Naomi, when she spread the garments Miriam had to wear before her; "and if he is gallant, you must let him kiss your hand—though," she added with a start, "that would be rather dangerous. Mine are rather too brown."

"I must wear gloves," replied Miriam, stroking her black hair. "I dare say my woman's wit will carry me through. But be on the lookout when I return. We may have to change parts and places."

Every feature of the whole affair was discussed over and over again, and then all retired to rest with a fervent prayer that they might meet with success in their rather dangerous undertaking.

Next day Naomi contrived another interview with Don Jose, during which she so flattered him, that he was quite in the seventh heaven of happiness.

She even promised to sup with him that evening on her return.

"Good-bye, now," she said, and went off to dress, directing the horse to be brought to the entrance of the house in half an hour.

It was fortunate for Miriam that it was the custom for Mexican women when out of doors, and especially when traveling alone, wholly to conceal their features by means of a hooded cloak.

When, therefore, Miriam, admirably made up in the disguise of Naomi, issued forth and leaped into the saddle, the idlers who were looking on never thought of questioning her identity.

The outer gate of the hacienda was open for the exit of the servants and others, and nothing stood between Miriam and liberty, except Don Jose, the major-domo.

He was standing on the steps leading to his own particular sanctum, ready to wish the young lady a last farewell.

Miriam saw him in time.

She was walking her horse, but just as Jose advanced, she gave a loud, merry laugh, and whipping up the horse, sent the animal flying at no mean speed through the open gateway.

"You jade, you!" muttered Don Jose, curling his thin mustache in his fingers; "I'll make you pay for that when you come home."

Meanwhile, Miriam was bounding over the wild prairie of Sonora in the direction of the colonel's habitation.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE INVALID.

THAT morning Charles Leicester had been pronounced as very much better.

He was partially clothed, then wrapped in a rich poncho, and placed in an arm-chair.

This was after breakfast.

Denby and Di had gone out into the grounds to breathe the freshness of the pine-apple grove, and Norah remained in charge of the sick man.

"What shall I do?" Norah asked, gently; "talking is unwise. Shall I read?"

Charles pointed to a mandolin which hung on the wall.

"I presume you play that instrument, and sing?" he said, softly.

Norah blushed.

She did play the mandolin, and very well, too, while her voice was well suited to this rather peculiar instrument.

But Norah reflected that the ballads and other ditties which suited the music and the voice were all on one subject.

And truly is music the food of love.

But to refuse was out of the question, as she felt the eyes of the sick man fixed thoughtfully upon her.

"I can sing to the mandolin," she said; "but it is a poor instrument, and the songs which suit its compass are rather silly in words."

"'Tis the sweet voice, the melody that charms the soul, not the mere words," he replied, in a soft, persuasive voice.

Norah had not the heart to refuse.

There are requests which can scarcely be declined, and this was one.

A denial of his wish would have been set down to affectation, or even to the right cause—that she was afraid.

And she was afraid.

She knew how her heart was beating, she knew with what wild and foolish imaginings her soul was filled, but she also knew that rather would she die there on the spot than betray the secret of her soul.

She arose, took down the mandolin, and seating herself on a low stool, began to tune the instrument.

Her back was partially turned to the invalid, and her eyes bent on the ground.

The Mexican songs she knew were far too passionate and amorous for her to risk one then.

She would surely break down, and this was something too terrible for her to think of.

Should he suspect?—she asked herself again and again.

Presently she began.

Poor girl, despite her every effort to be calm, despite the rare pressure she put upon herself, her very soul was poured out in gushing song.

So sweet, so richly melodious, so deep in compass was her voice, that Charles Leicester sat spellbound.

The very tears came to his eyes as she finished a wild,

passionate song, and sat confused and blushing on her stool.

"Never did I hear anything half so sweet," he said, in a low, hushed voice, that indicated the powerful emotion of his heart. "Indeed, Norah, you have a beautiful and sympathetic voice."

Norah made no reply.

He had called her by her Christian name, and this had sent her heart leaping into her mouth.

There was a brief silence, very awkward and almost significant, which Norah, however, was the first to break.

"And now, Mr. Leicester," she said, "having played the part of hostess, even to singing to please the wounded knight, I must go and look after the household affairs."

"You have a housekeeper," replied Charles, in a bitterly disappointed tone, "surely you need not leave me alone! I shall have all the blue imps, the song talks of, haunting me."

Norah had caught his earnest, pleading look, and had not the heart to refuse him.

She rang the bell and reseated herself, and in a few minutes the pretty dame who regulated the household entered and took her mistress' orders.

As soon as she had done so she retired, and left the young people once more alone.

Charles had no idea whatever of what he was doing, was not in fact aware that he was disloyal in act or deed to Miriam; but there was a strange, voluptuous new happiness in reclining thus, sick and weak, to listen to the siren's voice.

If his heart did beat a little quicker than it ought to have done, it only associated the fact with his weakness; but Norah, while yielding to the fascination of his presence, while drinking in, unawares, almost, deep draughts of love, knew that, to a certain extent, she was wrong.

"You will sing again; this time one of the ballads of this romantic country?" he urged, as she gave him a cooling drink.

"I am afraid they are too much for you," she said, her eyes cast on the ground; "besides," she added, speaking in a low, almost inaudible tone, "what will people think of my singing love songs to an almost entire stranger."

"Miss Fitzpatrick," he cried, in genuine amazement, and yet, as he looked at her speaking countenance, with some confusion, "surely there can be no harm in your entertaining a poor, sick stranger?"

"And yet people might say that music and light songs are not suited to the sick chamber," she replied, more archly.

"You are the most charming and delightful of your sex,

and to my dying day I shall know that to you I owe my rapid recovery," he replied, in tones so earnest that Norah turned away in deep confusion.

"I am glad to see that you are progressing so well," said the rather cold and sarcastic voice of Miriam Di Lasso.

Norah turned toward where she stood, very white and scared, but not wholly deprived of her mother wit.

"Mr. Charles Leicester is better," she replied, "and has insisted, very much against my will, on my singing some of my mandolin ballads."

"Which you sing with a power and sweetness which is quite new to me on this instrument," said Charles, who at sight of Miriam felt all his old allegiance restored; "but come in, pray, and let me know the purport of your visit."

"I come from mamma to see Colonel Fitzpatrick," responded Miriam.

"And not to see after the poor invalid?" added Charles, rather ruefully.

"It seems to me," she observed very dryly, "that the invalid is doing very well, and requires no pity or condolence from any one."

"I will go and let my father know you are here," said poor Norah, who felt ready to sink into the ground with shame at the evident insinuation contained in Miriam's words, and she glided from the room.

"Miriam," began Charles, in an appealing tone, "will you not come near me, or must I rise and fetch you?" and he made as if he would have carried out his threat.

Miriam, still cold and stiff in her manner, approached the invalid's chair, and, as she did so, thought she had never seen him look so handsome.

"My own darling!" he cried, as he caught her reluctant hand and held it in his own; "why are you so cold and shy—have I done anything to offend you?"

"Nothing," she answered. "What could you have done?"

"Miriam, you are my future wife, and by that token should have no secrets from me. Surely your faith in me is not so scant but that you leave me free to enjoy the society of others of your sex?"

"Oh," said Miriam, trying to turn the matter off with a laugh; "surely you do not accuse me of the mean vice of jealousy?"

"I?" exclaimed the delicious hypocrite. "Nothing of the kind, and yet you did not seem pleased when you found Norah and me together. But a truce to any trifling. My heart is wholly yours, and though I feel deep gratitude to my lovely nurse, no other sentiment than the purest friendship is possible between us."

"I believe you, Charles," she answered.

"Then tell me why you have really come?" he said.

"My mother lives in hourly dread of the marquis; dim forebodings, which she crushed within her at the time of my poor father's death, arise within her once more," responded Miriam.

"Of what nature?" asked Charles, who despite his anxiety, could not help toying with her beautiful hair and stealing a kiss from her lovely cheek.

"My mother never understood the real story of my father's death. She always believed the account given by the present marquis to be suspicious. To speak plainly, Charles, she had a strong belief of foul play. Yes," said Miriam, with bated breath; "she believes that he was murdered."

"Heaven! by his own brother?" cried Charles.

"There is another mystery. The present marquis is the elder. Why, then, while my father lived, was he called the marquis, and his brother treated as an inferior?"

"Then he can have no legal right at all!" exclaimed Charles; "an elder brother, whose younger takes title and estates, must be barred by some utter disqualification. Have you no suspicion—no clew?" asked Charles.

At this moment Norah returned with her father, and after the usual salutations, the conversation was resumed.

"The sudden elevation of the senor, or the decease of his younger brother, to the rank of marquis, was always a mystery to me," said the gallant Irish gentleman; "I could never understand it. During my worthy friend's life, he ever treated him as a favored servant—nothing more."

"What can this mystery mean?" asked Charles. "Have you no suspicion?"

"None."

"Nor you, Miriam?" asked the colonel.

"I think my mother knows; but since she came under the guardianship of my uncle, she is very reserved. She lives in constant dread of him: his assertion that she is a Louisiana slave, his production of the papers which assert her to be so, his threat to sell her away on the plantations, has so cowed her since, that she dares not speak—dares scarcely think."

"She must be freed from this bondage," said the colonel sternly; "and then the law shall remove her from the guardianship of the so-called marquis. I have influence, power, and will bring him to book."

"How can we get your mother and sister to join you?" said Charles.

"I cannot remain here. If my absence were to be even suspected, all would be lost. The marquis and his son

would be on their guard. 'Tis only fear of your influence in the church that now prevents a sacrilegious marriage. But they have deeply laid their plans, and when ripe, will carry out their nefarious schemes."

"But you will not place yourself in their power again?" cried Charles.

"My absence is not known, not suspected," she answered, shaking her head. "I cannot remain above an hour. I came away in the disguise of my own waiting-woman."

"Colonel," said Charles, piteously, "can nothing be done?"

"Yes, and shall be done. Go back, Miriam, and do you and your mother be ready to-morrow night. When your father and I were young men together, he made known to me a secret, which probably you, Miriam, know nothing of," he said.

"What secret?"

"Of an entrance to your hacienda, by which, in case of a siege, the scouts might return unknown to, and unmolested by the enemy," he said.

"I have heard of it."

"Well, it goes into a summer house in your private garden," he answered. "Be on the lookout; have your jewels and valuables ready. You shall be rescued from his clutches."

"Never can two poor girls be sufficiently grateful," said Miriam.

"Keep your thanks, my dear," said the colonel, with a smile; "and now, as Miriam must go, let us to lunch."

Charles looked ruefully at his host.

"I suppose," laughed the Irishman, "it would be high treason to take Miriam away, so let the meal be served here."

The orders were given, and then Denby and Di appeared on the scene, amazed and delighted to see Miriam in their midst.

After lunch, escorted by Denby, Miriam took her departure, after a warm and cordial parting with Charles.

But though Miriam was kindly in her manner to Norah, there was still a latent coolness, which not all her efforts could conceal.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE LETTER.

It was about an hour before sundown when Colonel Fitzpatrick, with Denby and a large party of armed peons and hunters, started on their way for the hacienda.

As the worthy Irishman wished his expedition to be secret and rapid, he took with him one of his best guides, Zachariah.

This man was told where he was required to take them, and under what circumstances.

He started at once with all the cunning of the sleuth hound.

He knew the woods as well as any pirate of the prairies himself.

Under the splendid trees, beneath the quivering shadows, beside the arched brushwood, over the rippling stream, until he reached a rocky, craggy spot near the river.

All alighted and fastened their horses to the adjacent trees.

They were to be left under the charge of the peons, while the colonel, Denby, and Zachariah, with one more picked man, effected a secret entrance into the hacienda.

The colonel led the way to where a number of pecan bushes skirted the rock.

There was a kind of hollow, something in the shape of a cave, but no apparent aperture.

But the colonel stepped to the very bottom of the hollow, and then a narrow fissure became visible.

He now produced a lantern and led the way.

"Keep in line," he said, as he entered the narrow and rocky way.

It soon, however, enlarged into a cavern, and then once more became a path, descending, it was clear, from the level and the damp, to the bottom of the river.

It was a long way, and frequently the ascent became as abrupt as the descent.

"We are within the hacienda," said the gallant colonel, "and must exercise great caution."

"We are soldiers, and obey," replied Denby.

They soon entered a kind of grotto, and here was a door which had to be opened by means of a skeleton key.

Looking around they saw they were in the grotto of the garden, set aside in all haciendas for the exclusive use of the ladies.

All was still, silent, dark.

"Remain here," said the colonel, who had shut the slide of his lantern; "I will go forth and reconnoiter."

He did so, and returned at the end of a few minutes.

"All is silent and still—no lights in the rooms. I am afraid something has happened," he whispered, in tones of disappointment.

"What is this?" cried Denby. "A letter."

The colonel flashed his light and saw at once that it was a letter addressed to himself.

He snatched it eagerly and opened it.

"Dear colonel," he read aloud, in English, "the marquis suspects something, and we are to be removed at once—I believe I am right in thinking—to Meriones, the old Spanish castle of which my father was so proud, but which he rarely visited because of its ruinous state. Our sole hope and trust is in you. MIRIAM."

"Gone—spirited away!" exclaimed Denby. "What a demon this man is. Where is Meriones?"

"In old Mexico, within a short distance of the capital, but in the center of the gold mines, a wild and lawless district," replied the colonel. "What rascally and desperate game is he about to play?"

"We must follow," said Denby.

"Mr. Denby," replied the gallant Irishman. "I have entered on my task not lightly or without reflection, but with firm and solid determination to sift the mystery and crime to a solution. I shall go to Meriones."

"You believe it likely he will take them there," said Denby.

"I have no doubt of it," said Fitzpatrick. "The place is wild, the people lawless, and he may there try by menace and tyranny to perpetrate his great crime."

"Let us away," replied Denby; "we have no time to lose."

"Hush! I hear voices," whispered the colonel, and all entered the secret path, leaving the door ajar.

"It is no use, Senor Jose," said the pert voice of Naomi; "if you did not betray me you betrayed my mistress, and have got her and her sister and mother packed off to that horrid Meriones."

"Hush, my dear, no names," said the major-domo, eagerly. "I really am sorry for what has happened. You know that I owe a duty to my master above everything."

"You should know, sir, that you owe a duty to your lady-love above everything."

Here followed a lover's quarrel, with the details of which we have nothing to do, but which elicited the fact that early that morning the marquis and party had started for Meriones, while the next day the household was to follow, leaving the hacienda to the old servants and peons.

This was enough for the colonel, who, with his party, hastened away.

This is what had happened.

Having been escorted to within a reasonable distance of the hacienda by Denby, Miriam resumed the reboso and skirt of the waiting-woman, and in this way reached the

gates of the hacienda, which, as usual, at sundown, were closed.

Tnere was a bell and a wicket for the visitors.

Miriam rang, and giving her name as Naomi, was at once admitted.

The porter looked at her.

"Against orders," he said, with a sly glance at the concealed face.

"Jose gave me leave," replied the supposed Naomi, in as pert a tone as she could assume.

"And here he comes," said the porter, with a grin, "to claim his reward."

Miriam had leaped from her horse with that lightness and agility for which she was rather celebrated.

The horse had been taken by one of the men.

"So, fair Naomi, cried the major-domo, advancing, "I must have a kiss from those pouting lips."

He attempted to snatch the much-coveted prize, and caught her around the waist.

Miriam gave him rather a stinging box on the ear, which made him let go and stare.

"A hard knock," he said, surlily, "and not your usual style. The Lady Miriam!" he cried, standing open-mouthed before her.

The reboso had fallen during the struggle and revealed her lovely features, on which rested an expression of anger and disgust.

"It's only a bit of masquerade," said Miriam, eagerly; "don't have Naomi punished."

"I know my duty," surlily replied the major-domo, furious at the discomfiture of his attempt, and angry at the trick which had been played upon him.

"Do as you please," said Miriam, coldly, and went into the house, leaving the major-domo in a towering passion.

He at once sought the marquis and humbly told his story.

"She has been to see that rascal colonel," said the marquis, fiercely.

"What is to be done?" asked his son.

"Follow me," cried the infuriated marquis.

They went to the chamber occupied by the ladies. They fully expected the storm, but received their visitors politely, offering them the chocolate of which they were partaking.

"I must decline," said the marquis, with his haughtiest and most insolent tones. "Miriam, my visit is to you."

"Why am I so honored?" she asked.

"Where have you been?" he asked, furiously.

"Am I compelled to answer such a brutal question? I am accustomed to be spoken to like a lady," cried Miriam.

"Then why condescend to sneak out in the apparel of a servant?" he cried. "I demand, I insist on a categorical reply. Where have you been, girl? Answer me truly—have no equivocation—or I shall know how to take full vengeance on those who deceive me and defy my authority."

"I am not in the habit of lying; I leave that for my betters," she answered. "I have been to demand the protection and kind offices of Colonel Fitzpatrick."

"And his base, fortune-hunting adventurers," he answered. "But a stop must be put to all this folly."

"Father, a word," said the son, who was listening with a downcast and sullen expression of countenance. "There's only one way to put an end to this trickery and treachery."

"And that is——?"

The answer given by the count was not very clear and distinct, but Miriam, whose ears were preternaturally keen, just caught the word "Meriones."

"It shall be done," was the stern reply; "to-morrow these obstinate girls shall be removed out of reach of the machinations of traitors and base heretics. Prepare to start with the dawn."

And they left.

Here was a terrible blow.

All ready on the following night to flee on the wings of freedom, to rest and liberty, and above all, love.

"What is to be done?" gasped Maria; "can we not fly to-night?"

"Even if we were not watched," said Miriam, "how could we find our way in the dark over those horrid plains?"

"And what will they think?" asked the poor mother, with a resignation that was sublime in its devotion. "If you girls could only get away, you once safe, I could die easy."

"I must write a letter and leave it in the arbor. No one ever goes there in the day-time, and the servants will be busy," said Miriam.

She accordingly wrote the letter, placed it on a small shelf near the secret door, and slipping down deposited it there, with a fervent prayer that it might be found.

At early dawn, guarded by a strong escort of peons and hunters, re-enforced by some of the rough-riders of the prairies, the ladies started on horseback for the distant and gloomy castle of Meriones.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE CASTLE OF MERIONES.

THE district in which the ancient Spanish castle, built at the time of the conquest of the country by Cortez, was situated, was about twelve miles off the main road to Mexico city, and was situated on a lofty hill overlooking a plain indented with gold mines.

It resembled nothing so much as a deserted field of coal mines, the absence of fires forming the most marked contrast.

Scattered here and there were the houses of the inspectors, and then again in clusters the miserable villages of the washers.

No populations are more wretched and impoverished than those which devote themselves to the extraction of precious stones and metals from the bowels of the earth.

Despite of the letter of the law, they were slaves, many galley slaves, condemned to the mines for life, and devoted to an existence worse than that of a negro of Tomano, and that is saying a great deal.

Guarded by soldiers with loaded muskets, the gangs worked both above and below the surface perfectly naked.

They were subjected to the most severe and torturing discipline, to prevent their acquiring even the most infinitesimal share of the precious things which they provided their employers with.

There were no villages, no inns, no place where travelers could be entertained.

The policy of the government was to keep away all strangers. With the usual jealousy of the Spanish race and government, they wished to keep all their operations secret.

It was therefore necessary even for the marquis, his party, and his retinue of servants, to prove their identity before they could pass on their way to the castle.

But once the marquis was recognized, there was no difficulty.

It was different with the colonel and his cavalcade, and this he knew.

As their presence in the gold district and their proximity to the castle were things they wished concealed, they were compelled to exercise great caution, and to march with all the circumspection of a band of robbers.

Zachariah was one of the best hunters of the whole district, and he undertook to pilot the caravan to a spot near the castle of Meriones.

They followed the main road, in the rear of the house-

hold which had gone to join the marquis at Meriones, openly at first, but on reaching the spot where they intended turning off, they halted until evening.

The party consisted of the colonel, Denby, Charles, and the two young ladies, with a powerful escort of armed servants and dependents of the colonel.

Charles was better, but, at the wish of his friends, rode in a litter, attended on during the whole road by his faithful Wilson.

Doubtless, however, he found the conversation rather monotonous, for he contrived, whenever there was a chance, to have Norah by his side.

It was not difficult.

They spoke eternally of Miriam.

It was only natural they should do so.

Denby kept by the side of the younger daughter, Di, and her father.

It was a hot and unpleasant evening when they issued from the barranca where they had passed the day.

It was one of the common roadside inns, and offered no other refreshment but that brought with you.

Zachariah entered, shortly after leaving the inn, upon a path of some extent, going, it appeared, into the very heart of the mountains.

It was skirted by heavy timber.

Some of the hills were clothed in dense vegetation, and it was among these they proposed to conceal themselves.

No one could say how long it would be before they could enter the castle.

It would be the utmost folly to attempt it by main force.

They must exercise ingenuity.

The castle grounds were surrounded by stout and lofty walls, and Zachariah knew that, no matter what the ruinous state of the castle itself, the walls of the gardens and grounds were intact.

They could perhaps be scaled, but everything demanded profound secrecy and patience.

They went along in almost Indian file for about an hour, always through the dense wood which skirted their course.

They could hear the not very distant cry of the hyena and panther.

But their party was too large to be attacked.

"We must go upward now," said the guide, pointing to the hills; "and it will be as well to be careful. Some of the way is steep."

Charles was carried by two mules, one ahead and the other behind.

It was, going up hill, a jerky and rather unpleasant method of progression.

Wilson stood on one side, and when she saw how rude was the way, Norah on the other.

They prevented the hammock-like structure from swaying.

"When shall I cease to be a burden and a trouble?" he said, gently.

"You are better already. The air of these mountains will soon brace you up," she said, kindly.

"I must say there is an elastic sensation already," he answered.

They reached a small mountain plateau, surmounted by other wood-clad trees.

"Here is the end of our journey," said the guide, who had dismounted and handed his horse to one of the peons.

Then he disappeared within what appeared the solid rock.

Presently, at the end of about ten minutes, he returned, and bade all follow, horses and all.

An almost sublime spectacle presented itself to them.

They were in the center chamber of a large cavern with diverging branches. On a kind of brazier burned a large fire of pine knots, while on all sides were torches stuck in the rock.

"Here we may lie concealed for years. We have water in abundance," said the guide, raising his hand for silence, and directing their attention to the sound of falling waters, "and game fills the forest."

"'Tis a rare hiding-place; but the chambers you spoke of?" said the colonel.

"This way," responded Zachariah.

He led the way, four men following with the litter, while the colonel, the girls, Denby and the servants brought up the rear.

Zachariah and the hunters, who had been to the place before, secured pine knots, and sticking them in holes provided for the purpose, soon pointed out two chambers, one for the females, and the other for the gentlemen of the party.

They were provided with sweet grass, and they had plenty of coverlets to make beds.

It was a wonderful and secure retreat.

As soon as all was prepared for the night, at the request of Colonel Fitzpatrick, the guide led that gentleman and Denby to a spot where they could obtain a good view of the Castle of Meriones.

It was a lofty pile, looming against a dark and gloomy sky, and looked more like a mediæval castle on the banks of the Rhine, than one built by the Spaniards so late as the conquest by Cortez.

It was not above half a mile distant, and was situated on the opposite side of the valley.

"It is a romantie old ruin," observed Denby; "and I wonder how it got there?"

"In the early days of the occupation of Mexico by the Spaniards," replied the colonel, "every man's hand was against them, and they had to build castles over the whole country. This was erected by one of the favorite followers of Cortez, then a Marquis Di Trejico. It has remained in the family ever since."

"And is now owned by that unhung rascal, the so-called marquis. I should like to smoke the scoundrel out," cried Denby.

"Perhaps it may come to that," said the colonel, gravely; "but we'll try fair measures first. We must act with extreme caution, as the fellow is, I believe, very popular with the wild population who inhabit this district."

Denby sighed.

The idea of the two beautiful Mexican girls being in the power of such a ruffian was intolerable to him.

What could their courage, resolution and devoted love do against the brute force of their tormentor?

Nothing.

* * * * * * *

Meanwhile the girls, with their unfortunate mother and attendants, had been hurried off with scant ceremony.

The mother was closely imprisoned in a litter, beside which the girls rode on horseback.

There was only one hope for them, and that was that their friends should find the letter.

"The wicked appear to me," said Maria in a low, hushed tone, "to triumph in this world. What hope is there for us?"

"My hope is to be delivered or die," replied Miriam, gravely; "I have no choice. To wed with any one I do not love is impossible; I would rather perish by my own hand."

"Miriam!" cried Maria, "surely your sorrows have made you mad, to think of self-destruction. No! anything but that."

Miriam made no reply.

It was a long and tiresome journey, and the girls shuddered as they gazed up at the walls of what was to be their prison.

Their gloomy and portentous aspect seemed to strike a chill to their very hearts.

As the heavy gates closed behind them, they felt that awful sensation exemplified in the poet's words: "Leave behind all hope ye who enter here."

They were conducted to a suite of apartments, which in their day may have been splendid enough, but which now, with their antique tapestries, furniture and neglect, were anything but inviting.

Fires were, however, soon lighted by the domestics of the castle.

The marchioness looked around with a wan and sickly smile, and her daughter with blanched cheeks and beating heart.

A sigh escaped the bosom of the marchioness, and she laid her hand on Miriam's shoulder.

"Many happy days," she said, "have I spent in these apartments, days now long since gone by. When your father first married me, he brought me here. We had three months of unalloyed joy."

"Indeed!" cried Miriam, interested despite her gloom and despondency; "I suppose all was not so dark and miserable in those days?"

"The darkness and misery is in our own souls," replied the countess; "twenty-one years ago I came here a young and happy wife, caring for no society but that of my husband. We might have stopped here years looking after the estate, but one of those revolutions, so common in our country, called your father to a high position, and we went to the capital where you were born."

"Twenty years may make a difference," sighed Maria; "but it seems a fearfully gloomy den to me."

"But," said Miriam, who had cast herself on a couch, "those brave Americans will not leave us here. Let them once find us and all will be well."

"But will they find you?" said the mother; "we are, as it were, out of the world."

"They will find us, if they spend a year in the search!" exclaimed Miriam.

"You have great faith in your young friends," smiled the poor mother.

"As you had in father," said Miriam, simply; "they are as good as they are brave."

"But it will not be easy for them to enter within these walls. It appears to me this old castle would stand a siege from an army," observed Maria.

"If we knew they were in the neighborhood," replied the mother, in a low tone, "I think I could find means to leave the castle. I do not exactly remember the details, but there is a private way, by which your father and myself often left the castle to wander in the hills. To-morrow we will quietly look for it. It is somewhere through the vaults."

"Heaven, mother!" said Miriam, warmly; "try and

remember. This secret way may be the salvation of us. If they try any force or tyranny, better escape into the wilds or woods and die, than submit to their foul designs."

"It is strange to me," observed Maria, "and the more I think of it, the more I am puzzled how the marquis can dare to urge a marriage, if he is indeed our uncle."

"He is not your uncle," sighed the marchioness; "of that I am certain. But your father, who had a strange liking for him, never explained the mystery of his birth. That he had full and complete confidence in him is shown by his making him guardian over your persons and fortunes."

"Strange infatuation, indeed," said Miriam, "and one which I never could understand."

The entrance of a servant with the inevitable chocolate and cakes now checked the conversation, and it was not renewed.

They were very tired with the journey, and gladly retired to rest.

Next day, however, Miriam, who had been thinking of the matter half the night, again spoke to her mother on the point of escape from the castle if the worst came to the worst.

"I have a very dim recollection of the way," replied the marchioness; "your father was always with me, and led the way. But when night comes and all is still, we will try."

This was generally agreed on, and then each sought in some way to pass the time.

As the clock marked the ghostly hour of midnight, the three women arose.

Each carried a taper, and Miriam was secretly careful to secure a pair of pistols, though such was her mother's horror of firearms, that she did not say anything to her on the subject.

Not a sound was heard within the whole confines of the castle as they started on their voyage of discovery.

Miriam walked with her mother leaning on her arm.

The marchioness was very much agitated.

Remembrances of the past seemed to crowd upon her as she moved along, memories not at all painful, for hers had been truly a happy married existence, never marred during her husband's life by any jars or miseries.

"This is the way we often passed at early dawn," she said, "to go forth like children and pick violets and other flowers in the woods. Ah, those were days of happiness!"

Her daughters made no reply.

They were intently anxious for the discovery of the

secret, and cared not to interrupt the sweet memories of the past.

"Yonder are the stairs which lead to the vaults; no change in them. They appear, from their darkness and gloom, from the cobwebs which hang about, to have never been visited since those days."

And surely they did look gloomy enough as, raising their tapers, they peered down the vault-like aperture.

The air was damp and moldy, and when they reached the vaults below, the wind very nearly blew out their lights.

"Be careful," said the marchioness, with a shudder, "these vaults are winding and vast; and if you are left in darkness, we may never get out."

The vaults extended in all directions.

"I am afraid," said the marchioness, "I shall have some difficulty in finding my way."

She appeared, indeed, to have lost all memory of the road.

"I am quite bewildered," she said, holding up her hand to her head; "your father used to take me along one of these alleys, but for the life of me I cannot tell which. Still, let us advance; if I see the gate leading upon the valley, I shall recognize it fast enough."

And, rousing herself to more vigorous action, she stepped forward, and glancing keenly around, took her way right across the vault.

A that moment a cry—unearthly, as of terrible and mortal anguish—arose at no great distance.

"Merciful Heaven!" shrieked the marchioness, and sank insensible on the cold stones.

"For Heaven's sake, rise!" said Miriam, striving to lift her up; but the weight was too dead and heavy.

"Some one is in the vault," whispered Maria, pointing to a distant light.

Miriam seized her taper, and, with her own, hid them in a kind of niche that was handy to the spot, and then, holding her breath, waited.

Not for long.

They soon recognized those who were their companions in the vaults.

It was the marquis and his son, who, with white, haggard and scared faces, came hurrying toward them.

The marchioness gave something between a sigh and a groan; but, though it was very low and indistinct, their quick ears caught it.

"What was that?" asked the son; "no eavesdroppers, I hope."

As good fortune would have it, there was at that moment

a scampering of rats across the vault, who, as they ran away into their holes and hiding-places, uttered shrill shrieks and cries.

"'Tis the vermin," said the marquis, much relieved; "they have been scared by that unearthly cry."

"Enough to make them," replied his son, with a hoarse and mocking laugh; "it nearly scared me."

"I had not thought your nerves so delicate," sneered the marquis.

With which words he led the way up the steps to the upper regions of the castle.

"What can it mean?" Miriam whispered to Maria. "Who gave that cry—and why are they in the vaults at night?"

"Let us get out of them as soon as possible," said Maria. "I wish I had never seen them. Mamma, dear mamma, speak to us."

"Where am I?" she gasped; "what was that noise I heard—that fearful cry, as of a despairing soul?" she added.

"Can you rise?" asked Maria, who was nearly dead with fear and terror.

"Help me up," she said, feebly; "I am very weak and cannot help myself."

They raised her up, and then tottering along, barely able to walk, even with their help, she slowly returned to the apartments assigned to them.

As soon as she reached them, she cast herself on her couch, where she remained in a series of fainting fits for some hours.

Her words were incoherent and wild, but toward morning she fell into a deep and refreshing sleep, from which she did not awaken for some hours.

When she did so she was more composed, and having taken her breakfast, was able to speak with calmness of the events of the night before.

They told her what they had seen and heard. She listened with the most intense earnestness and gravity.

"'Tis some awesome, gruesome mystery," she said, with dilated eyeballs, "and we must find it out. Who knows but it may give us a clew to some of his misdeeds?"

"What do you suspect?" asked Miriam.

"Some accomplice whom he fears, some instrument of his dread crimes he lives in fear of, and has immured him in a living tomb. The man must know his secrets—have some terrible hold on him—and yet knowing your guardian as I do—how could he have spared the life of one he fears?"

"We must release the captive at any cost or risk," said

Miriam. "Who knows but the prisoner may be able to serve us?"

"Surely," said Maria, "you will not venture into that awful vault again?"

She was nervous and agitated, and scarcely knew what she did.

"I will, if I go alone!" cried Miriam. "I believe Providence has brought us here to unravel a great mystery, probably the secret of this man's existence. And never shall I know rest until I have come to the bottom of his list of crimes. You can remain with mamma; to-night I will again visit the vaults."

"No," said Maria, moodily. "You shall certainly not go alone. Much as I dread the place, great as was the horror I experienced last night, I will go with you. Foolish, timorous girl as I am, I will not shrink from what I believe is a duty."

"Brave girl!" cried her mother: "you are right; in this world never shrink from duty. Something tells me that you will be rewarded for your courage and resolution."

The garden connected with the castle was large, and being surrounded by a wall at least fourteen feet high, there was no hinderance to their walking within its confines.

There were gardeners, too, about, who were occupied in seeing to the magnificent fruits and flowers which adorned this more than earthly paradise.

The ladders, however, had been removed. There was no intention on the part of their guardians to allow them to communicate with any one outside the walls.

But Maria and Miriam had another object in view that day.

Vaults and dungeons must have some sort of loophole or window communicating with the upper world, and those they had visited the night before were clearly well ventilated.

They strolled leisurely through the grounds for some time, looking at the fruits, flowers, and the work of the gardeners, until they believed they had exhausted suspicion.

They then moved away close to the castle walls, to that portion of it which they believed to be erected over the vaults and dungeons.

They soon found the spot, and concluded, from the presence of narrow loopholes, such as were once provided to shoot arrows through, that they had reached the desired spot.

But what they principally looked for was the sound of

human voices—some repetition of the cry of the previous evening, which might give them some faint clew to the dungeon of the captive.

Moving along with cautious steps and slow, they approached a small thicket, surrounded on all sides by a thick hedge of prickly pear.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Miriam, in a low tone, "if we are near the solution of this mystery. Here is a gate leading into the interior of the thicket."

But the gate was locked.

"Never mind," cried Miriam, "we can jump over."

She was about to suit the action to the word, when a short, ugly-looking negro, with tremendous arms, and a queer, scowling countenance, appeared.

"Not dat way, ladies," he said. "Dat pribate garden. Massa neber allow any dar but hisself."

And as he spoke he stood before the gate with a pretended deferential bow, but with a dogged aspect of determination to resist all endeavors to disobey him.

"Is there anything very wonderful in this part of the garden?" asked Miriam, with difficulty getting up a laugh. "All the more reason that we ladies should want to see it."

"Clean ag'in orders, I reckon, and can't be done," said the negro.

"And pray who may you be?" Miriam continued.

"Me Good Grab—faithful servant. Always obey orders," said the negro, in a surly tone.

"Very well, Grab," continued Miriam, willing to conciliate him; "you shall not come to grief through us, I daresay there is nothing to see."

And with these words they went away, more than ever satisfied that there was a mystery existent, and that the black was in the secret.

They left the garden, and retired once more to their apartments.

What their guardians were doing, was a sealed mystery to them, though in the course of the day they found that they had left the castle.

They heard this through Naomi, who came with the major-domo and the rest of the servants.

They made up their minds to one thing above all, to trust no one with the secret of their suspicions.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE VISIT TO MERIONES.

THE second evening after the arrival of the party in the cavern, Charles Leicester felt himself quite well enough to

join the others in any plan that might be decided on for the rescue of the girls.

The first thing necessary was to let them know that they were on their track.

The friends determined to visit Meriones and reconnoiter.

They took with them only the guide and Wilson.

All were well armed, and dressed in plain Mexican peasant dress.

If seen, they would be taken for hunters, but they fully intended not to be seen, as the presence of strangers in the neighborhood might excite suspicions and surmises that might lead to a discovery of their secret haunt.

It was ten o'clock when they started, under the protection of a dark canopy of clouds, which threatened them with one of those storms which are so common and violent in the mountains of Mexico.

They had short tarpaulin or waterproof cloaks, which served to protect themselves and their guns from the rain, and in this way they started from the cavern, and made their way across the valley to the foot of the hill on which the castle was erected.

But when they approached it, they found that on all sides it was equally unapproachable.

Without regular scaling ladders, the garden itself could not be invaded.

"It's a regular old middle-aged fortress," observed Denby, smoothing his mustache; "a regular Blue-Beard castle, and I can see no way of getting in."

"And yet we must penetrate within its walls—we must reach the inside and let the darling girls know we are at hand to save them from degradation and misery," said Charles.

"For the present, senor," observed the guide, "we had better seek some shelter from the storm, which otherwise will drench us to the skin."

As the heavy falling drops proclaimed the fact with a force there was no resisting, all turned to take the advice of the guide, who speedily led them to the mouth of a small cave.

They had scarcely entered, when the storm began in earnest.

The rain fell in torrents, the thunder rolled in the distant hills, and the lightning flashed with singular brightness.

"We are lucky, indeed," observed Denby; "these caverns are wonderfully convenient."

"This one, I suspect," said the guide, with a knowing look, "will prove, perhaps, doubly convenient. I believe it to be the secret entrance to the castle, of which I have often heard."

"Heaven, what good fortune!" cried Charles Leicester, excitedly; "let us explore it at once."

The guide, who had brought them to this place with premeditation, at once produced a bundle of small tapers.

He had often made it his retreat when hunting, but having no motive for exploring it thoroughly, he had not pried into the secret.

All he knew was from rumor.

After going about fifteen yards, they found a steep ascent in the shape of some rude steps.

There could be no doubt they were on the right track.

Charles Leicester, though still pale and thin, was very active and excited beyond measure.

Suddenly they reached a small platform, and there in the solid rock was a small iron doorway.

They tried it, but it was immovable—solid as the large stones in which it was fastened.

"This is the private entrance," cried Charles, searching vainly for a keyhole: "and there is some secret way of opening it. You are worth your weight in gold, Zachariah—but how to open it?"

"I see no clew at all," said Denby, with a very blank look. "We want a blacksmith, or at all events a petard."

"The latter," replied the guide, dryly, "would rather alarm the inhabitants. We must think of something else."

"I can see nothing but the gunpowder; in the middle of the night, when all are asleep, it would not be very dangerous," urged Charles.

"There is a blacksmith in the mountains," replied Zachariah, "who will soon open the door if he is well paid, and I know you Americans are not very shy of your money."

"Hist!" said Charles; "back! Somebody is trying it on the other side."

Somebody was trying a key in the lock.

But, it was clear, without success.

"Heavens!" cried Charles, in an ecstasy of delight, and yet of regret. "'Tis the girls. They have discovered the secret way, and are trying it."

He was so convinced of the truth of his surmise that he rushed to the door, shook it with all his strength, and called aloud:

"Miriam! 'Tis I—Charles!"

There was a confused murmur on the other side, the character of which he could not make out in any way.

Then there was a complete stillness, though in the distance the storm raged furiously.

"I shall go mad!" cried Charles, while Denby looked angry and puzzled. "Can nothing be done?"

At this moment some pressure on the inside caused a small plate of iron to fall, and revealed a small keyhole.

"Who speaks?" asked a voice.

"Oh, joy, the voice of Miriam! 'Tis I—Charles Leicester. Cannot you open it?" he asked, wildly.

"Impossible. We cannot find the right key; but come to-morrow. We will make a further search before we retire," said Miriam,

"How is Maria?" asked Denby, speaking through the keyhole.

"She is here to speak for herself," replied the young lady, archly. "Well enough in body, but sorely suffering in mind."

"And your tyrants?" asked Charles.

"Are absent to-day, but may return at any time. There is no time to be lost."

"One moment," whispered Charles; "let us try to break open the door."

"Away—away!" said Miriam, frantically. "We are followed! Do not be seen for your lives!"

"But, Miriam——" he frantically urged.

But no answer came, and not knowing what to think, the four watchers of the night hurried away, and returned to the mouth of the cavern, where they remained until the storm was over, when they returned to the camp to prepare for the events of the next night.

Charles and Denby were delighted even for small mercies. It was, besides, a deep source of satisfaction to know that those they loved were in the castle, even if cooped up and confined as prisoners.

The marquis and his son, believing themselves perfectly secure, would not hurry on matters. They would seek by isolation and confinement to break the spirits of their victims.

Little did any of them suspect the new phase upon which the conspirators had entered.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE LONE CONVENT.

DESPITE the wealth and power of the marquis and his son—despite their recklessness with regard to public opinion—there was one power in the Republic of Mexico which was too much for them.

This was the church.

Dispensations can be obtained for almost anything, and especially for marriage, when not too near the prohibited degree.

The marquis, being only a half-brother of the late mar-

quis, was not so near as to render a marriage impossible; but the relationship was sufficiently near to render a union with the consent of the church very difficult.

The priest in their pay would have had no regard to any scruples of this kind, the more that both the marquis and his son intended to solemnly deny, in case of marriage, the relationship of the girls.

They were the daughters of a slave mother, possibly adopted by a fond father.

But the publicity given to their designs, the steps taken by the young Americans, their appeal to the archbishop, were matters for serious consideration.

Despite the existence of some utterly unprincipled priests, and of others half-savage and ignorant, there were in Mexico sufficiently high-minded and virtuous ecclesiastics to repress disorders and punish irregularities.

The girls were firm in their determination to refuse consent to any marriage, under whatever form, and the dread of exposure acted upon the minds of these two men with an influence and power that no other sentiment could.

Besides, the calm determination of the girls, the hatred and contempt, of which they made no secret, had aroused in the bosoms of these two ferocious men a sense of fury and disappointment which was rapidly eliminating any such sentiment as they profaned by the name of love.

Whatever sentiment they might at one time have experienced was now turned to hate.

That morning, at an early meal, the father and son spoke out their mutual sentiments, the younger and more energetic man, as usual, leading the way.

"I tell you what it is," he cried, "I think you and I are making two fools of ourselves."

"Speak for yourself, young man," observed the marquis, with a frown.

"Well, my respected parent, we must come to some understanding. I shall soon be moped to death in this place, which I never expected to have visited again. Here we are shut up in a foul and noisome den, inhabited by crows and bats, and other noxious animals, and all because we hesitate to strike a blow," he added.

"I have done enough," said the marquis, with something like a groan. "Already my conscience gives me no rest; my sleep is disturbed by weird dreams—and sometimes," he added, with a deep sigh, "sometimes——"

"Well, sir?" cried the count.

"I repent—yes, on my soul I do—and wish the cruel evil I have perpetrated undone," he said, with startling emphasis,

"Why not confess, and if you escape the garrote, you may end your days in a yellow dress, sweeping the streets of Mexico!" sneered his son.

"Spare your sarcasm," continued the marquis, calmly. "I know the penalty of repentance and confession, and have no desire to pay it. Still this terror and suspense must end. I am tired of Mexico. In the old world—in France especially—we might forget. In the whirl of Paris, in the midst of its luxurious enjoyments, we might even be happy."

"But the girls and their vast fortunes? Do you mean to abandon them to those young reptile heretics?"

"No—by Heaven, no! Listen to me, and you will hear my final decision," said the gloomy marquis.

"It would be a satisfaction to know it was final," observed the count, still sneeringly.

"After the inteference of the archbishop, backing these insolent intruders, to marry these girls is simply impossible. The ties of consanguinity which might have been ignored, had the marriage taken place unopposed, will now bar us forever. We should be excommunicated, and Mother Church would heavily help herself to our possessions," he added.

"What then?"

"The girls must take the veil," was the somber reply, "bequeathing us all they possess, save only the dowry, which must be paid to the convent which shelters them."

"But they will resist," cried the count. "Besides, what convent would accept them against their wish? All that was very well years ago; but in these days of liberalism and enlightenment," he added, with a bitter laugh, "such things are at an end."

"You forget the Black Nuns of Serano," said the marquis, coldly.

Cruel and wicked as was the count, he shuddered, and hesitated some moments ere he answered his father.

"It is a convent for criminals," he cried at last—"for impostors!"

"And are they not impostors?—the daughters of a slave mother," responded the elder man, "who had combined with my brother to cheat me of my inheritance, to deprive me of rank, name, and fortune? Had my brother had a legal son, where should we have been?"

"Where, indeed?" said the count, looking at him from under his eyelashes, with a sardonic smile.

"Rely upon it, the Mother Abbess of Serano will soon make them sign a full confession, the more that on their consent depends their mother's fate. This night the Senor

Brown, from Louisiana, will arrive with all the papers to prove she is his runaway slave."

"But the authorities?" said the count.

"The man will come in secret. If we come to terms, he will take away his property. 'Tis for him to carry her off. Depend upon it a shrewd and clever Yankee will know how to act. After breakfast I ride to Serano."

"I have never seen the place," retorted the son, "and will ride with you."

Never seen the place. Neither he nor any one else, as a rule ever had seen the place.

The convent of Serano was equal to what we should call a reformatory. It was a prison governed by the rigid order of Black Nuns, to which were sent criminals of the upper classes; first-class female misdemeanants, faithless wives, obstinate daughters, and ladies guilty of crimes from the consequences of which their relatives and friends wished to save them.

These were the involuntary residents among whom the marquis planned to place Miriam and Maria.

The convent was a low building, surrounded by vastly high walls, with a ditch of some extent and depth surrounding it on all sides.

But the most remarkable feature of the convent was a chapel planted on a rock, and which was only reached by means of steps cut in the stone.

It was surmounted by a tall crucifix.

Again, this convent was guarded by soldiery.

Outside the drawbridge gate was a guard-house, and one sentry was always on duty, day and night.

"Truly," said the count, as with his father he rode up to this fearful abode, "this reminds me somewhat of my school reading—something about Dante and his 'Inferno.'"

"Well," said the father, champing his gray mustache, "it may be said, abandon all hope ye who enter here. As for the young ladies, I have no pity or compassion for them. They have brought it all on themselves."

At this moment they were rudely challenged by the sentinel on duty, who bade them to halt.

"Friends to see the lady abbess," replied the marquis, in a haughty tone.

"Advance one friend to see the lady abbess," was the formal rejoinder of the soldier.

The marquis, bidding his escort await his signal, rode forward, and taking a letter from his breast, handed it to the soldier.

That person called out the corporal of the guard, gave him the missive, and then bade the senor return to his party and await further orders.

"Mighty particular," said the count.

"My friend," replied his father, with a sarcastic smile, "that convent contains, it is true, some dangerous criminals, but it contains worse, the secrets of many a noble family. Daughters without number are here sacrificed to the ambition of the eldest son, others sacrificed because they would not," he added, with a sardonic laugh, "give up the man of their heart."

"A pretty purgatory," grinned the count; "I should fancy there were some charmers worth rescuing."

"Many," was the answer; "but here comes the response to our missive."

The guard summoned them to advance, and as they did so, the drawbridgefell, and the gates of the convent opened wide.

"Enter," said the sentry, laconically, and went on with his monotonous and weary walk.

As soon as the whole party were inside, the gates were closed, and a monk in black, with a hood over his face, revealing only two fiery eyes, advanced.

"The marquis and his son will follow me," he said, in a hollow tone, "the rest will remain here."

The two gentlemen at once obeyed, and alighting, proceeded to follow the monk through several dark and gloomy passages, opening as he did so no less than five heavy iron doors.

At last he pointed to one which stood open of itself.

"Enter there," he said, in a deep, hollow voice.

They obeyed, and found themselves in a room all surrounded by black. Its furniture was one chair, two stools, a table over which hung a crucifix, and on which were three skulls, in front of which was a perfect panoply of bones.

"I understand," said a woman, suddenly appearing from behind a curtain, "that you have business with me, senors?"

She was a little, active woman, with deep-set eyes, cruel, thin lips, and a generally ferret expression of countenance.

"We have, most excellent lady," responded the marquis, in his most dulcet tones.

"Be seated," said the superioress, taking the one cozy armchair, and pointing to the stools, "and then be brief."

"I will not take up more of your valuable time," said the marquis, with slightly sarcastic emphasis, "than I can help. I want to place two girls under your protection."

"Temporarily?" she coldly asked.

"For life," was the answer.

"One moment," she cried, and taking up a bell, rang it thrice.

An attendant entered with a large book like a ledger, which she placed before the lady superior, and then retired.

The woman opened the book, and dipping a pen in an inkstand, prepared to write.

"Names and ages?" said the woman, with the utmost coolness.

"Nineteen and twenty—Miriam and Maria," was the really startled answer.

The marquis was astounded at the matter-of-fact way in which the other did business.

"Their crimes?" she went on.

"Being illegitimate, and children of a slave, setting themselves up as heirs to a large property," he replied.

"Refractory and disobedient," she said, as if reading to herself. "Anything else?"

"They boast of being heretics," was the whispered response, "and defy and insult the church."

"Ah!" she cried, "we have special cells for those who deny their religion."

"I am glad to hear it," said the marquis. "They will learn to know the value of humility and obedience."

"You are well aware that you have said for life. Reflect well—once they enter here, even you yourself cannot release them."

The tones of the marquis were deep and husky, as he said:

"I am well aware that once they enter this place, they remain here till death."

"You know that these female boarders of mine are expensive?" she continued.

"Name your price," he exclaimed.

"One thousand ounces down," was the cold and frigid response; "one hundred a year, paid with strict regularity."

The marquis again smiled sardonically.

But he knew that such luxuries as he was about to indulge in were expensive, and he had come prepared.

He laid the money demanded by the superioress on the table.

"When will you bring them?" said the woman, as she carefully placed the money in a drawer.

"I should wish them fetched—swiftly at night, and carried off without exciting the remotest suspicion," said the marquis.

"Command. It is my duty to obey."

And the marquis gave his minute instructions, which the other promised to obey.

She arose.

"Caballeros," she said in a more suave tone than she had as yet assumed, "you have ridden far. While I give orders and instructions, will you refresh yourselves?"

The gentlemen were nothing loth, and when the monk entered, readily followed him to the refectory, where a dainty lunch was laid out, quite at variance with what might have been expected in that spot.

The monk pointed to the refection and to the chairs, and was about to retire.

"We are accustomed to have our host eat with us," said the marquis, with polite irony.

The monk cast off his hood, and showing a grinning face, that of a powerful man of forty, at once obeyed the command.

"I am completely at your orders," he said; and with a dexterity born of long practice, he began to carve and bountifully serve the hungry travelers.

He helped himself as freely as he did the others, and poured out foaming goblets.

Presently the marquis arose, and taking out a small but well-filled purse, dropped it into the at once ready hand of the priest.

"For the poor," he whispered.

With a chuckle, the monk made the valuable parcel disappear in the folds of his robe, and then proceeded to guide them to the courtyard, where their escort awaited them.

In ten minutes more they were on the open plain, which spread for miles around the convent, without tree or bush.

"Ouf!" said the son, who had scarcely spoken once during the whole interview. "I feel like a prisoner escaped from a dungeon. It is an awful place."

"I think we shall find our doves a little more manageable after a short residence in that place of retirement," observed the marquis.

"That residence?" said the young man, with a pitying shudder. "I should think few could remain there long. Besides, they are never to leave."

"But that they will not know," resumed his father. "They will be promised freedom, on condition that they give a formal renunciation of all claims to the estate."

"I see," mused the count, and lighting up a cigarette, he dashed away upon the plain.

It was three in the afternoon when they regained the gloomy castle, which the girls believed to be the most terrible prison in the world.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE NIGHT ADVENTURE.

It was with the utmost impatience that Charles Leicester and Denby awaited the coming of the night, when they would make a determined attempt to enter the castle.

After long consultations, they had contrived a kind of infernal machine, or petard, which would, by blowing open the ward of the lock, enable them to force an entrance through the iron door.

They were, however, also prepared with some heavy crowbars and other instruments, which might enable them to make a violent and forcible entry.

In accordance with previous arrangements, and with the advice of the guide, the whole party kept within the cavern during the day.

It had, however, another exit, on the opposite side, of the castle of Meriones, which opened into a wood, and this spot was used as a recreation ground.

It happened that during the hour usually devoted to the siesta, the two young men, never forgetful of their gallantry and devotion to the fair sex, proposed to Norah and Di a stroll in the wood.

No inhabitants had been noticed on that side, and therefore there appeared no danger.

It cannot be said that the colonel's daughters looked upon their expedition in any way as a hardship.

It was regarded more in the light of a romantic adventure than anything else.

They had strolled under the lofty trees, beneath which grew the rich creeping vegetation of the semi-tropics, and their talk was of the coming adventure of the night.

"If I pull the castle down stone by stone," said Charles, warmly, "I will effect an entrance. Every instant the dear girls remain in the hands of those ruffians is madness and torture."

"I never was brought up as a bricklayer," remarked Denby, in his usual quaint manner, "but I could manage a little carpentering. I should say a ladder would be a proper thing to try."

"Escalade instead of battery," said Norah, who always assumed a tone of light-hearted merriment.

"Your idea," responded Charles, gravely, "is an excellent one; and in case we do not enter by the vaults, it shall be tried. Any way, this night I shall enter the castle of Meriones."

From habit with the girls, they had been speaking in Spanish,

"Who talks of the castle of Meriones, when the convent of Serano is close at hand?" said a hollow voice.

All started, and saw before them a young and handsome cavalier, his face, however, gaunt and pale, with every sign of physical and mental suffering.

His clothes, once handsome and well-made, were seedy and in tatters.

But his sword, spurs, and even the elegant gun he carried, indicated a caballero of no mean rank.

He was alone.

"Sir!" cried Charles, with a peculiar glance at Denby, "I presume you have been listening to our conversation?"

The tattered wanderer drew himself up to his full height, looked haughty and proud, despite his woe-begone attire.

"The Count Di Speranza is no eaves-dropper," he said; "but I heard the words 'castle of Meriones' spoken bitterly, and involuntarily alluded to my own sorrows."

"Heaven!" cried Norah, who knew the brilliant young noble alluded to well; "you are not Carlo?"

"Who calls me by my name?" he continued, half wildly.

"The Colonel Fitzpatrick is here, and surely you have not forgotten Clara's schoolfellows, Norah and Di?" she answered.

"Clara!" he half shrieked; "do you know what has become of her? No! I see it by your scared looks. Be seated and I will explain."

In silent astonishment the whole party obeyed, and in a few words the hapless youth and lover told his tale.

He loved.

His rank and high position, descendant of a Spanish grandee, he had the right to aspire to the daughter of any noble in Mexico.

His choice fell upon Clara, a member of the great and princely family of Medina Sidonia.

But the great trunk was in Spain, and only an offshoot existed in Mexico.

This offshoot consisted of Count Luis Di Sidonia, his only son and daughter.

They were rich, but not rich enough to dower son and daughter equally.

Now, it was the custom of the house, if the money at hand failed to provide the daughter with sufficient to marry her in splendor, that the daughter should go to a convent.

The Count Luis had only enough property and cash to provide for his son.

His daughter, therefore, must become a nun in order that her brother might swell and strut on the brief stage

of human existence in all the peacock pride of rank and wealth.

But the Count Di Speranza had seen and admired Clara, and by means of those duennas, who are supposed to guard the wives and maidens of Spanish origin from lovers and sweethearts, had contrived many interviews.

The young lovers pledged themselves to one another by every sacred vow beneath the moon.

Then the Count Carlo made a formal demand for the damsel's hand in marriage.

The Count Luis Di Sidonia was polite, even proud, but family arrangements precluded her accepting the honor.

His daughter had solemnly devoted herself to the church.

The count hotly replied that this must be an error, as he demanded her hand with her own consent, and was quite rich enough to accept so rare a gift without any dowry.

"The daughters of Sidonia," said the cold, cruel, haughty father, "never leave their home as dowerless wives. She is the bride of the church."

The Count Di Speranza withdrew, and that same night contrived to see Clara.

They at once agreed to escape to Europe, where their marriage could be completed without any of those difficulties which render matrimony so difficult in Mexico.

But the terrified duenna betrayed them, and when the father found the daughter defiant of his authority, and warmly protesting her design to tell the truth at the foot of the altar, his mind was made up.

Clara was never more seen, but was hurried away to the convent of the Black Nuns of Serano, there to be brought to that state of mind which would induce her gladly to accept the offer of seclusion in one of the rich and aristocratic convents of Mexico city, the members of which move, under certain very easy restrictions, in society.

They are, in fact, often, for beauty and accomplishments—especially singing and music—its greatest ornaments.

All listened to him with the greatest interest.

"And the convent?" asked Charles Leicester, when the young man had told his story; "can such a place be in existence?"

"It is not far from here," said the young man; "a short ride from Meriones. I saw the marquis and his son visit the place this morning. They have just returned."

"From the Black Convent," cried Charles, arising from his grassy seat, trembling with emotion.

"Yes, the two, with a heavy escort, went this morning to the convent. I follow every party who visits there.

Any day the cruel Sidonia may wish to release her child."

Charles and Denby exchanged looks.

The expression of terror on their faces was unmistakable.

An awful dread had fallen upon their souls.

"Come with us. We must at once consult the colonel," cried Charles, explaining his fears to his new friend.

"It's awful—it's horrid!" said Denby, who, despite his assumed levity, really shook with alarm.

And all hurried into the recesses of the cavern, where they found the colonel just arousing himself from his siesta.

His astonishment at seeing the young count in such a state of mind and *deshabille*, was intense, almost ludicrous.

But he heard his story,

"My friends," he said, when all had been explained, speaking with due gravity, "we are in a terrible plight. If the marquis is playing this desperate game, I really know not how we can act. Once in the Black Convent of Serano, they are for ever beyond our reach."

"Not if I burn the fearful den about their confounded ears!" cried Charles.

"That's just it," said Denby.

"My friends," interrupted the colonel, solemnly, "the Black Convent of Serano is a kind of state prison for women, and those who are confined there are chiefly, I believe, persons who deserve their fate. How far the power of the heads of this holy place has been abused, I know not."

"Clara Sidonia is there against her will," cried the young lover.

"You say so, and I believe you; but I do not see the remedy. What we want is some power stronger than that of the marquis and his son to demand the release of Miriam and Maria," he added, "if they are sent to the convent."

"Their mother," gasped Charles.

"They say she is a Louisianian slave," replied the generous Irishman, with a sigh. "But there, let us assure ourselves of the fact, and my name isn't Fitspatrick if something is not to be done to release the unfortunate girls from this fearful Hades."

"Let us start at once," cried Charles and Denby, in one voice.

"We must not be rash. To start before nightfall would be madness," continued the older man; "so seek repose, and when the hour comes I shall be ready."

The delay was distasteful to the young men, but they saw the wisdom of it and consented to wait till nightfall.

The young men retreated to their own private chamber,

and invited the young count, their companion in misfortune, to smoke, while he told them all he knew of the horrible convent.

They were lovers all, and their conversation may readily be imagined.

Before the hour of setting off, they were bosom friends.

About seven the guard was ready, and a really large armed party was detailed for the expedition to the castle.

All were heavily armed, as none knew what difficulties they would have to encounter.

Zachariah walked first; all the rest in single file behind.

In this way they reached the foot of the hill on which the castle was situated.

As soon as they entered the cavern below the rock, a torch was lighted.

They at once made their way toward the heavy iron door with all their appurtenances.

The guide lost no time, but at once applying the petard sent all to conceal themselves in an inner cave.

He then fired a fusee of some length, and fleeing himself, rejoined his companions.

They had not long to wait for the event.

In a few minutes a sharp, but rather dull explosion was heard, a stifling smell of gunpowder made itself evident, and then all rushing out found that the petard had snapped the lock, and they were at once able to force open the door.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### IN THE DARK VAULTS.

Both Charles Leicester and Arthur Denby in that supreme moment were almost powerless through excitement.

They were provided with torches and with two lanterns, and lighting the latter began to look around.

They were in the vast vaults of the castle—vaults cut in the solid rock, with large pillars at every seven or eight feet to support the mighty superstructure over their heads.

All listened attentively.

Not a sound was heard, and yet the time had come when the girls were to meet them.

Midnight struck from the chapel clock in the great courtyard of the castle.

"They said midnight," cried Charles Leicester, with a dark frown on his handsome face. "I hope nothing has happened to prevent them keeping their appointment."

"I shall not draw back, even if we have to face the marquis."

They crossed the vaults in the direction of the steps which led to the upper part of the house.

But still no sound.

Not a trace of those they came to seek.

"What can it mean?" asked Charles, who was, on the present occasion, singularly despondent and alarmed.

"They have been watched and suspected," said Denby.

'Remember," urged the young Spanish nobleman, "what I told you of the Black Nuns of Serano."

"But the marquis would not dare to proceed to such foul extremities," said Charles.

"If you knew the man as well as I do," responded Don Speranza, "you would believe anything of him. Strange stories are told about him. His life has been a desperate one. Some believe him to be the same with El Polido, the noted robber, who assailed a government escort, and robbed them of a million of gold."

"And he holds his head up high in society!" cried Charles.

"Very many strange things happen in Mexico when a man's flush of money. Doubloons and dollars cover a multitude of sins."

At this moment a fearful groan was heard from some corner of the vaults.

"What can it be?" asked Charles.

"The ghost of some former tenant of the vaults," urged Zachariah, who had all the usual superstitious belief of his countrymen.

"Help—mercy—I die!" was plainly heard.

"No ghost, by Heaven! but some wretched prisoner," said Charles. "By Heaven! who knows but we may be the means of unraveling some terrible mystery? Thank Heaven we came."

Guided by the mysterious sounds and groans, the whole party hurried across the vault, and found themselves in front of a heavy door, set in solid rock.

The voice inside was low and indistinct; but the murmurs were as if of one in pain—in, perhaps, mortal agony.

"'We must break open this door!" exclaimed Charles, resolutely. "Zachariah, use your tools."

The guide at once produced them from under his goat-skin cloak.

"Be patient," said Charles, in a low, but clear and distinct voice; "friends are near."

"Friends! Ha—ha—ha!" was the hollow reply. "Dogs! bloodhounds! assassins!"

"The poor fellow's mad, I fear," observed Charles to his bosom friend; "and no wonder, if he has been long immured in these dungeons."

The lock was strong and obstinate, and for some time resisted the efforts of the guide.

At last, however, using the powerful leverage of his crowbar, he succeeded in getting a good purchase, and in wrenching it open.

A foul emanation, as of hot, steaming air, came out of the dungeon.

Charles Leicester and Denby entered, the others holding back.

A direful, doleful spectacle presented itself.

The ground of the cell—a dungeon a few feet square—was covered by a fetid pile of straw, which, from damp and consequent heat, was steaming.

On the ground, chained to the wall, was what appeared a human being—was, in fact, a man—but so gaunt, haggard, and with such lack-luster eyes as to resemble rather a wild beast than a creature in God's image.

"Who and what can it be?" whispered Charles.

"No matter; let us take him away from this vile den," responded Denby.

The guides and others were now summoned, the chain was rent in twain, and four men, lifting the poor creature, who did nothing but sigh and groan, carried him out of the cell.

Zachariah at once examined his wallet, and offered the poor sufferer bread and pulque.

Like a famished dog, he devoured the food and made signs for more.

Zachariah, who was a man of experience, gave him a little more, slowly and in small quantities, and then allowed him to drink his fill.

He seemed revived, but made no attempt to speak, looking around with a vacant stare, indicative of hopeless idiocy.

"No matter who he is, we must release him. A foul and wicked crime has been perpetrated," cried Charles; "and by Heaven! if the marquis be guilty, we shall have him in our hands. Let him be taken out, and some of you make a hand-litter to carry the poor fellow. I shall ascend the stairs, and see if we can discover anything."

The young Spanish nobleman volunteered to remain in command of the party, while Charles and Denby set out upon a voyage of discovery.

Both were well armed, with short cut-and-thrust swords and revolvers, which they concealed under the poncho, which was their outer costume.

The top of the stairs once reached, they found themselves in a long passage, illuminated feebly by two oil lamps.

Everybody appeared to have retired to rest.

Not a sound was heard.

The silence was, in fact, overwhelming and oppressive.

"The whole household must be in bed," whispered Charles; "but the girls? They positively promised to be in the vaults to-night."

"They have been watched, suspected," urged the young man.

"If the young count's surmise be correct," continued Charles.

"My dear friend, if it be so, rely upon it we will get them out. They are willfully and criminally detained against their will, and Colonel Fitzpatrick will be able to obtain their release."

"It is very difficult to get out of such a place," said Charles.

"There is a light above, moving," whispered Denby.

"Ah! who can it be? Let's draw back in the shaddow," exclaimed Charles.

They stood on one side in deep shadow and waited.

It was Naomi, the favorite attendant on Miriam and Maria.

She was descending the stairs rapidly, a wild look in her eyes.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Charles seized her.

The girl started, and a frightened cry arose to her lips.

"Naomi, don't be frightened," he said; "we are friends —you know us."

"Heavens! what do you here?" she gasped. "Too late —too late—she is dying?"

"Who is dying?" said both, wildly.

"The marchioness. I am going in search of stimulants. I will not be five minutes. You can see then for yourself."

And she flitted past without another word, and disappeared quickly down the obscure passage.

In less than two minutes she returned with a bottle of brandy and glass on a tray.

"Follow me," she said; "there is nothing to fear, the marquis is absent from the castle."

With wildly beating hearts, the two young lovers obeyed, mad with doubt, anxiety and fear.

On entering the room occupied by the marchioness, they found that lady lying on a couch, insensible to all appearance, but groaning in a low and feeble tone of voice.

Naomi hurriedly opened the brandy bottle, moistened the patient's lips, and then poured a small quantity down her throat.

She opened her eyes and looked around with a wild and startled glance.

"Oh, my children! Monsters, give me back my children, and do with me what you will!" she cried.

"What has happened? Do not keep us in suspense," cried the lovers.

But the marchioness was incapable as yet of explaining, and Naomi was nearly as incoherent.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE BLACK NUNS.

MIRIAM and Maria remained nearly the whole day with their mother, except when she urged them to take a walk in the garden to recruit their faded cheeks.

It was a terrible day—a day of severe toil.

The hours appeared to hang on their hands, and every minute seemed lengthened tenfold.

What the mystery of the vaults might prove they knew not, but they felt that it was something which interested them in some way.

The discovery of any villainy done by their uncle and guardian would probably give them some latent power over him.

Then, too, they were in hopes to meet their lovers, and by their aid escape with their beloved and persecuted mother from the despotic influence of their cruel foe.

"There is the thicket. The negro does not seem to be on the watch," whispered Maria.

Miriam gave a startled glance around, and then, putting her finger to her lips, entered the thicket.

It was composed of an intricate series of paths, very much after the fashion of a maze; but, after several futile attempts, they succeeded in nearing the walls of the castle.

They even made out a sort of loophole, or air-hole, from the vaults.

"If this should prove the cell of the prisoner," said Miriam, in a low tone, "we may obtain some clew to guide us."

And suddenly clutching her sister's hand, she advanced towards the desired spot.

"Yah—yah!" said the mocking voice of the negro guardian; "what lilly lady want in de massa's pribate garden?"

"Surely we are doing no harm," replied Miriam, rather more startled than she liked to own.

"Only massa no 'low anybody yar," was his significant response: "if you no b'leabe me, you ask him."

And waving his heavy club rather menacingly in the air,

he pointed to the pathway which led out of the thicket, and the girls, utterly helpless, took the road indicated.

The man saw them to the extremity of the thicket, and then, with an ironical bow, bade them good-morning.

"And you no try walk here any more," he said, showing his jagged teeth; "it not good for lilly misses' health know too much."

And he returned to his point of vantage—a small hut which he appeared specially to occupy as guardian of the mysterious thicket.

"More and more am I resolved," said Miriam, when they were out of hearing, "to solve this dread secret of the prison house. The marquis must be deeply conscious of some foul deed to have his prisoner so jealousy guarded. Who could it be—what can it mean?"

"Some one who has offended his implacable temper. Of course, some innocent person, or else he would not be secreted here," responded Maria.

Could they have known, could they have suspected even a faint glimmer of the truth!

As neither of them was inclined to continue their stroll, they went indoors, and in the society of their mother, the slow and weary hours passed away.

The marchioness was exceedingly unwell, and unable to act with anything like vigor or animation.

It was agreed, therefore, that, though she should sit up and wait the result of their adventure, she should not accompany them.

They would return with their lovers, and then a final decision would be come to.

Their hope was, that once and forever they would that night leave the castle of Meriones and all it gloomy recollection behind.

They dined mechanically.

It was something to do, and then about nine o'clock were summoned all three to the reception-room of the castle.

Visitors had come, ladies, and it was only meet that the marchioness and her daughters should receive them.

As the two girls entered the great drawing-room supporting the feeble form of their mother, they found themselves in the presence of the marquis and his son, accompanied by three women, nuns of some severely ascetic order.

As far as they could judge, they were three very strong and repulsive-looking women.

"Why am I summoned here?" said the marchioness, sinking into a chair; "in my state of health, I should be waited upon,"

"Had we been told, we would have saved you the arduous journey," said the marquis, with a cold and bitter sneer; "but as you are here, it will not be necessary to return. These ladies who honor us with their presence are three of the Black Nuns of Serano."

"I have heard of them," responded the marchioness, coldly, "as women who devote their lives to the care and education of misguided females."

"And of obstinate and disobedient girls," said the marquis, sternly. "These ladies wait for the company of your daughters. Until they learn proper discipline, and break off forever with their heretic, fortune-hunting lovers, they will remain in their custody."

The marchioness arose, as if to hurl an imprecation at the other's head, and fell back speechless.

"Monster of iniquity, we are free women, and you dare not inflict such an infamy upon us!" cried Miriam, wildly.

"Therefore we absolutely refuse to go. We will never be taken there living!" added Maria.

"Young ladies," said one of the women, in a harsh tone of mingled threatening and coaxing, "you have been confided to our care for a certain period, and had better come quietly. We shall be able to use force if necessary."

"I appeal against this foul cruelty. Man, you dare not take my lambs to that den of infamy, that prison for foul and lost women!" exclaimed the wretched mother. "You dare not put this fearful insult on your brother's children."

"Marchioness," replied her brother-in-law in haughty accents, "you have brought it on yourself. You have in every way defied my authority; you have allowed your daughters to carry on a clandestine correspondence with heretics and fortune-hunters, and I, their guardian, have obtained leave from the proper authorities to confine them at Serano until such time as these craven lovers leave the country."

"Craven lovers! Men of evil and of crime, you dare not face them! They would treat you like whipped curs rather than men!" cried Miriam. "Beware! they are at hand, and know where we are concealed——"

"Away with the mad girls!" said the marquis, in a furious tone; "you hear how they defy us. Tell your excellent abbess what you have seen."

The women advanced, as if to lay hands on them.

"Mercy!" cried Maria, falling on her knees. "Do not let us go with them. Confine us in the dungeons below, rather."

"Eh, what?" exclaimed the marquis, exchanging an alarmed look with his son; "what know you of the dungeons below?"

"That they contain at least one victim already of your foul and wicked crimes."

A cold and cruel smile passed over the face of the master of the house.

"So," he said, "you have been prying into my secrets. 'Tis well I know it; for the future you will have no chance of doing so."

He struck a gong, and several servants entered.

"Bring the two young ladies' riding dresses at once, and let the horses be ready in half an hour. I will myself escort you and see you safe within the convent walls," he added. "I shall never be content until you are under firm and judicious restraint. Resistance is simply folly."

It would be impossible to describe the scene which followed.

The fainting mother, the frantic girls, who gave way at last to the abject terror which the very name of the convent excited in their minds, the sullen servants hardly liking to back up their master.

Above all, the cruel, stern and immovable nuns.

No human passion or feeling touched them.

They awaited the attendants, clothed the wretched victims, and then bore them more dead than alive to a litter prepared for them, carried by four mules.

Then they mounted in company with the marquis and his son, and started on their weary and terrible journey.

The castle was left to the charge of the major-domo and servants; only one of whom, the faithful Naomi, remained with her unfortunate mistress.

She was carried to the room and placed upon the couch where, for some time, she remained, shrieking for her children, and calling down Heaven's vengeance upon their merciless persecutors.

The terrible scene having been described to the young men, Charles, with a dark, gloomy frown on his face, spoke:

"My lady marchioness," he said, "there is but one course for you to pursue; you must leave this place at once—place yourself under the protection of Colonel Fitzpatrick, and expose the shameful and unnatural conspiracy."

"Do with me as you please," she said, sobbing on the shoulder of the girl; "but why hamper yourselves with a weak and useless old woman?"

"Madam," answered Charles, in a voice in which deep emotion was distinctly visible, "I hope some day to call you by the sacred name of mother. Rest on me as you would upon a son."

She burst into a wild paroxysm of tears, and at once allowed herself to be led away.

They crossed the vaults and reached the cavern on the outside of the castle.

The litter had been already made, and the wretched being whom they had rescued from the vaults was already lying in it fast asleep.

"You will find room for this lady," said Charles.

This matter was soon settled, and all bearing the litter in turns, they advanced slowly toward the great cave of the mountains.

When they entered the cavern, Norah and Di rushed forward to meet them.

"Where are the girls?" they cried.

"In the Black Convent of Serano," was the gloomy answer.

"They have never dared!" exclaimed the angry Irish officer.

"They have," said Charles; "but here is the marchioness and some wretched victim of the villain whom we have rescued from the castle vaults—both need attention and repose."

The two unfortunates were conveyed into one of the chambers scooped out in the rock.

Both were heavily inclined for sleep, and were left, therefore, with only a small lamp.

A domestic, a half-caste negress and Mexican was detached to watch with them all night.

Then the young count, the colonel, and the two *attaches* of the American Embassy, seated themselves around a fire, and the whole state of things was laid before the colonel.

"I, for one," said the young count, "am so determined to rescue Clara, that I have already entered into treaties with some of the gold-diggers of the mountains, and if everthing else fails, I shall storm the guard-house and make a forcible entry."

"Forbear," said the colonel; "we will think of that as a last resource. In the first place we must try gentle means. When the marchioness is in presence of a judge, she can state her whole case, make affidavit on oath, and I believe, with my influence, we may get them all out of this den."

"My own opinion is the same as the conde's," put in Charles. "I should storm the place and release all those unjustly detained."

"And never leave the country alive," answered Colonel Fitzpatrick. "We must exhaust every fair means first, and then—well, if you choose to risk your necks for

your lady-loves, I suppose youth will be youth, and you must."

"I am sure my Clara will never get out by any means but force," said the conde.

"And when you get her out?" asked the Irishman, gravely.

"I must fly to where the law will enable me to marry her," he said, proudly.

"It is now the hour of four," observed the colonel; "let us rest, and defer further conversation until the morning."

The two friends—we might say the three friends—arose and left the worthy officer to his reflections.

They were too excited and anxious to care for sleep.

They ordered coffee, and lighting cigars, the three young men talked.

Morning came, and the trio began to think of obtaining a little rest previous to being called to a late breakfast.

They were in the act of wishing one another good-night, when loud outcries claimed their attention.

The servant who had been watching the two invalids came rushing in.

"The gentleman and lady have gone mad!" she cried.

They entered the cavern, followed by the astounded and astonished Fitzpatrick, and beheld the marchioness sobbing on the neck of the unfortunate prisoner of the vaults.

"Oh, my husband! my darling husband!—can it be him—are you in truth alive?" she gasped, in choked accents.

The wretched man looked a little less haggard than before.

"I am the Marquis Di Trejico," he said, in a hollow tone; "who speaks?"

"Your wife!" she gasped.

"Am I alive or dead? Am I in purgatory?" he whispered.

"Good God!" cried the colonel; "is this really my old friend, the marquis?"

"Colonel Fitzpatrick," he said, in a strange tone, "how came I here? Who has released me from the clutches of my foul and unnatural brother?"

"These gentlemen," said the colonel, rubbing his eyes; "but, my dear Trejico, you have been supposed dead many years?"

"Yes," he continued; "but give me wine; and oh, my dear wife, whom I never expected to see again, listen to a tale of matchless villainy!"

## CHAPTER XXX.

### A TALE OF MATCHLESS SUFFERING.

It was some minutes before any one could realize the fact that the true marquis was alive.

The marchioness, despite her bitter grief in relation to her daughters, could not conceal her rapture and delight.

"Dead to me for years," she cried, "and thus mercifully restored to me!"

"For years!" he said, staring around.

"But, my noble and esteemed friend," observed the colonel, "allow me to suggest that before you exhaust yourself by any other speech, you should refresh yourself. You used to be the same size as myself, and I believe a bath and a change of wardrobe would do more to restore you than aught else."

"Above all, do not let my identity be known beyond your immediate circle," said the dead-alive, speaking in a hollow, stern voice. "When I come before the world, it must be as the pitiless avenger of blood."

"Everything shall be as you wish," replied the colonel, who summoned his major-domo and two active young peons, who were ordered to provide the marquis with everything he required and to assist in dressing him.

When the marquis reappeared, supported by the two attendants, his hair cut and disentangled, his face cleansed, all could see the change even more distinctly.

He was propped up with cushions beside his wife, and began slowly and tremblingly to eat his breakfast.

"That scoundrel," he said, presently, "no doubt believes me dead. When he last closed the door of my cell, he left me without bread and water. He meant to starve me to death, and swore never to return to my dungeon."

"All the better," put in Colonel Fitzpatrick. "He will not discover your escape."

"True—the cold-hearted villain! Ah, wife, how could you ever believe I would leave you and my daughters to the guardianship of my base-born, illegitimate brother?"

All stared, too surprised for speech.

"Base-born!" cried the Irishman; "the desperate vagabond!"

"He was older than I. Before my father ever saw his wife, my mother, he had formed an illicit connection with a beautiful Louisianian quandroon, a slave."

"Great Heaven!" cried the marchioness; "and this cold-blooded villain has tried to prove me a slave and no wife."

The marquis looked wildly at her, while the two young Americans exchanged glances.

"Now that I know the fiend—now that all his villainy is revealed to me in its cold-blooded nakedness, I can believe anything," said the marquis; "but let us talk no more of him now. Let me collect my thoughts and tell you all in proper order."

Charles Leicester and Arthur Denby arose.

"We will not intrude on a family council," said the former.

"These gentlemen are friends of yours, colonel?" said the marquis, courteously.

"Yes—brave Americans, connected with the embassy," replied Fitzpatrick, with a smile.

"Suitors, my dear Henry," said his wife, "for the hands of your daughters. Not knowing of your existence, I have approved their suit. It is to release me, also your daughters, from accursed bondage, that they are here in the mountains."

"Be seated, caballeros," said the marquis, with grave politeness. "Your intentions alone give you a right to hear my story."

"From an early age my father let me into the secret of my brother's birth.

"Without being very fond of him, he was led as much as possible to do justice to him, and when he died, left him entirely to my charge.

"I must say that I rather liked him.

"He appeared very much attached to me, was outwardly deeply grateful for all I did, and with deep and hypocritical humility, even accepted all I did for him as a favor.

"In addition to a small fortune left to him by my father, I allowed him a very liberal salary, as intendant of all my numerous estates. This enabled him to live well, to keep up a position, and even move in society.

"I never betrayed his position, and allowed the outer world to think what they pleased.

"I know now that I was wrong, and should not have encouraged the wicked and base impostor.

"He was often absent, sometimes for a year, living up here in the mountains, to look after my gold mines.

"Up here he married, and resided for many years with his wife in the castle of Meriones, which I, as a rule, only visited once a year.

"I heard rumors that his life was rather wild and lawless; but I never received any confirmation of what appeared to me idle calumnies," continued the marquis.

"People say," interrupted the conde, with a deprecating

wave of the hand, "that he is identical with the great pirate of the prairies."

"Possible," answered the marquis; "at all events, he has committed crimes worthy of such a ruffian, as you will soon hear."

"It is now nearly five years ago that there was a great *pronunciamento* in this state. A powerful body of rebels, under Colonel Santiago, arose, proclaimed the state separated from the rest of Mexico, and captured nearly all the chief towns.

"The president of the republic ordered me, in my capacity of general, to levy an army and march against the revolutionists.

"I readily obeyed, always having done my duty to my country and my convictions.

"But it was easier to make the essay than succeed.

"The troops were discontented; their pay was bad, and those who were to be trusted were required in the capital. In this strait I turned to my half-brother. I had immense accumulations, the saving of years, and I bade him use all this money to secure myself a sufficient following to put down the rebels. I trusted him in everything and truly found my reward. He was my aid-de-camp, my trusted adviser, and by my favor and influence was raised to the rank of colonel.

"We took up our quarters at Sonora town, the only spot free from the insurgents, and there called together our forces.

"The number of recruits who came in was great.

"At last I found myself at the head of a strong force.

"But in the meantime the rebels had not been idle, and collecting all the discontented classes, they announced their intention of besieging me where I lay. I, however, was determined not to be cooped up in a walled town, and consequently at once marched out to meet the rebel force.

"They were camped in the mountains, but were believed to be in a sufficient force to venture on a pitched battle.

"'Send out scouts,' I said to my aid-de-camp and brother: 'if these fellows will not come down to meet us, we must meet them.'

"'I have sent out the best runners in our army,' was the eager reply, 'and rely upon it we shall have a good account of them.'

"We had marched all the morning, until the heat of the day became considerable, and I declared a halt near a number of thickets, at no great distance from an extensive forest. Every man was allowed two hours for refreshment and repose, while on all sides picked men were placed as sentries.

"I seated myself beneath a wide-spreading tree, and indulged in my favorite habit of smoking.

"As soon as I had finished smoking, I felt a drowsiness come over me.

"Suddenly I was awakened by loud shouts, the sudden ring of musketry, and then horrible groans and cries.

"I started up, my head heavy, my whole senses suffering from stupefaction and fright.

"I was surrounded by my own faithful body-guard, which had been surprised by vastly overwhelming forces, and which was being cut down without mercy.

"'Heaven!' I cried; 'where is my brother?'

"No one could say.

"'*Muerte—muerte!* Kill, slay the marquis!" cried savage voices—the voices of men who knew me, doubtless.

"I roused my almost benumbed faculties, and fought desperately.

"But we were fatally overmatched, and at last, stunned and insensible, I fell to the ground.

"It is impossible for me to say how long I remained in this state, but when I came to myself, I was alone—alone, however, with the dead, and with other companions more loathsome.

"It was a moonlit night, and as I raised myself on my elbow, I saw that the carrion was at work.

"A number of vultures were tearing their victims to pieces with savage energy.

"In the distance I heard the whining cry of the coyote and prairie wolf stealthily approaching.

"I was weak from loss of blood, but I was able, with my left hand—the right was disabled—to draw my revolver.

"As the heads of the cowardly and savage beasts approached, I fired steadily at them, and away went some of the troop howling.

"Then I sank once more on the ground, I was perishing from thirst, I but a few hours ago the commander of a gay and gallant army, the owner of vast estates and untold gold. I was burning with fever, and began to have some signs of delirium.

"There was no hope for me but to die where I lay, and become food for the horrid vultures, wolves and other fearful things, which collect from far and near when the battle's agony is over.

"Hard as it was, I tried to resign myself to my fate, but could not do so.

"What thoughts of my wife and little ones—of the happy home which I had left at the voice of duty!

"Then suddenly it occurred to me to ask myself what had become of my brother.

"Had he been slain when the first attack was made?

"Alas! I should never know; for was not death slowly creeping on me?

"No! What is it?—voices. Ah! am I then to be saved?

"The voices were clearly afar off; but I could distinctly make out not only the speech of many men, but the heavy tramp as of a patrol.

"Presently I saw a number of heavily-cloaked men emerge from under the adjacent trees in the gray moonlight.

"'He must have fallen here,' said the choked and indistinct voice of my half-brother.

"How gladly I heard those tones; how my heart beat wildly as I saw a prospect of salvation.

"'I am here,' I cried, in a voice which absolutely startled me; 'water!'

"He approached, lantern in hand, and looked me full in the face.

"I could see his own countenance was fixed and ghastly.

"'Not dead?' he muttered, with a peculiar intonation that struck me with half amazement, half terror; 'try this.'

"And he held the grateful, welcome flask of wine and water to my dry, eager lips.

"'Thank you,' I said, with a sigh of deep relief. 'What has happened? How is it I am here?'

"'I will explain all presently,' he continued, in a hoarse tone; 'the first thing is to remove you from here. The enemy are prowling about, and may surprise us at any moment.'

"Then making a sign, a horse-litter was brought up, myself placed inside, and we started.

"I was so weak and even light-headed, that I could make no effectual resistance, even if I had desired so to do, but I did not.

"I dozed away for some time, and when I again awoke to consciousness, it was broad daylight.

"I could only, however, make it out through the curtains which shrouded me.

"Presently the mules halted, and I knew that I was being carried by men.

"Then I was laid down, and shortly after placed upon a bed in a small, low-roofed room, which I did not recognize.

"Then I was attended by a strange priest and woman, the former of whom declared that my case was very precarious.

"It was within the range of possibility that I might recover, but there was an almost equal chance the other way.

"'Send for my wife and children at once,' I said to my brother, who was standing by my bedside.

"'As soon as possible, brother,' he answered; 'but you must know that we are in the castle of Meriones, beset on all sides by the rebels, and that it will be difficult to send a message. Still, dictate one, and then, if you will sign it, I will send it at once.'"

"A messeuger did come," interrupted the marchioness, "to say that you had perished on the battlefield, and been buried with the others, hurriedly, while battling with the exultant foe."

"I can believe anything now," he answered, with a deep sigh. "I doubt not that when I signed these pretended messages, I signed other and more false documents."

"Did you make him, in writing, uncontrolled guardian over your wife and daughters?" asked the colonel, "and declare him your legitimate heir to the title and certain estates?"

"Never, so help me, Heaven!" cried the marquis, with quivering and trembling lips—"never!"

"Then he has added forgery to his other crimes," said the colonel, as he produced all the necessary documents to convince me.

"You will hear all," said the marquis.

"Several days passed, during which he led me on by promises—told me messengers had started, and fed me with continual hope.

"Then at last he showed the cloven foot.

"'To-morrow, come what will,' I said, 'I shall start for home. They must be enduring an agony of suspense!'

"'Nothing of the kind,' he answered, with a bitter and savage sneer; 'they are perfectly reconciled to the decrees of Providence—they believe you dead and buried.'

"'And you allow them to believe this unhappy falsehood?' I cried.

"'I have sent myself to say that you are dead and buried, which you are," was the cruel answer.

"'Am I going mad?' was my wailing cry; 'tell me, in mercy, what am I to believe?'

"'What you please,' he said. 'Brother, I have long since wearied of playing the toady, the dependent, the poor relation, hanging on to the skirts of splendor, seeing the sweets and glories of power and wealth, and enjoying them not.'

"'Man, what mean you?' I asked.

"'That, placed by our common father's wickedness in

an inferior position to yourself, I, your elder brother, have ever regarded you with intense and undying hatred, and for years have planned to supplant you and take your place,' he went on. 'Do you think I have been your subservient lackey for nothing?'

"'Which you are!' I cried, in my wild and tempestuous passion; 'a base, cowardly slave, without one spark of the virtue which is sometimes found in the negro.'

"I tried to rise, as I saw in his face the fiendish look of hate and fury.

"He clinched his fist as if to strike me.

"'No!' he said, with a hoarse laugh; 'why strike a man who is already dead and buried? Those words are your death-warrant. You shall never live to repeat them to mortal ears.'

"'Would you slay your brother, monstrous hypocrite and villain?' I cried.

"'I will not shed your blood,' he answered; 'but in this castle of Meriones there are, as you know, cells where you may linger for years, and no one be the wiser.'

"I glared at him with an awe which bereft me of utterance.

"'While you are shivering in the cold, dying by inches, fed on bread and water, I shall sit at your board, eat well and fare sumptuously. More, recollect I am no true blood relation, and by means of my influence and timely offerings to the church, I shall wed your glorious daughter Miriam—my son unite himself with Maria.'

"I know that I burst out into revelings and imprecations, that I flew into so great a passion that I fainted.

"When some memory came back, I was lying on straw in the cell where you found me.

"I attempted to rise, and found that by a refinement of cruelty incredible on the part of one on whom I had lavished nothing but kindness, I was chained to the wall.

"Light came in from a grating, and revealed the fearful horror of my position.

"In the first moment of my despair my passion was wild and tempestuous.

"Gradually I grew calmer, and thanked Providence it was so, for I was to receive a visit from my cruel and fiendish oppressor.

"'I am about to leave Meriones for some months. Your family will want change of air and scene, and I shall propose foreign travel.'

"'Fiend! my wife and children will see through your treacherous hypocrisy,' I cried, 'and defy your base plottings.'

"'Rave away,' he said. 'Farewell. Probably we may

never meet again—and yet I will give you one more chance.'

"'What is that?' I asked, mockingly.

"'Make a will, declaring me your universal heir and legatee, with guardianship of your family, and instead of this cell you shall have a suite of rooms in the ruined wing of the castle, and be treated with kindness.'

"'Tempter—fiend!' I cried. 'Never will I rob my darlings for such a base and cowardly knave!'

"He bowed low with a savage and mocking laugh, and left me—left me for many months."

The marquis continued his story after a short pause.

"I had bread, water, and having a little money and many diamonds, a bottle of wine when I cared to have it.

"My jailer was a savage, brutal negro, with an avaricious, slavish soul, and he would do nothing save for lucre.

"When he found the value of some of the diamonds that adorned my wallet, he condescended to let me have the extras I have told you of, exacting from me first a solemn oath never to reveal anything to his employer.

"This promise of course I readily gave.

"He even allowed me a light at night, and some books from my own library.

"But to my entreaties for pen, ink and paper he turned a deaf ear.

"I offered him a fortune, an estate, money, if he would convey a letter to my wife.

"He answered, with a grin, that fortune, estates, money would be of little value to a man after he had been skinned alive, which was the fate promised him if he showed me any favor.

"At last I ceased to implore him, and fell back upon my bleak destiny in sullen dignity.

"Naturally, I could hope for no alleviation of my sorry fate.

"After what my cruel half-brother had done, he could expect no mercy from myself or from society.

"But I believe in no heart that ever beat—in no bosom that ever heaved, is there ever an entire abandonment of hope.

"And thus what appeared many years passed away, when the negro hurriedly entered my cell, caught up my books and lamp, and prepared to hurry away, as if afraid of their being seen.

"'What's the matter?' I asked.

"'Hush! here's massa. Take bery good care what um say,' he replied, in a low, frightened whisper, and fled.

"Shortly after, haughty, booted and spurred, and

dressed as a man of rank and fashion, my brother entered the cell.

"'Confinement agrees with you,' he said, with a cold and bitter sneer.

"'I am not dead yet. Providence preserves me for a great and good purpose,' I answered.

"'Have you thought better of my offer?" he said; 'a comfortable bed, attendance, warmth, good food, in return for what never can be of the faintest use to you.'

"'Never will I barter my birthright and the fortune of my children for selfish comfort. Do your worst—slay me—starve me—do as you will, but make me sign anything you never will."

"'I am going to Europe on a tour. I shall take your eldest daughter with me. We shall probably be married before I return,' he added fiendishly.

"'She will never so lower and degrade herself,' was my impetuous answer.

"'We shall see,' he added, laughing.

"'Every law, human and divine, repudiates such an alliance, and no priest will dare solemnize it,' I continued.

"'In Europe I shall drop all allusion to the relationship,' he sneered.

"'But my noble, high-minded daughter will never consent to such a foul and unnatural union!'

"Then the vile monster, keeping strictly beyond my reach, beyond the limit of my chain, spoke in a low, unctuous whisper:

"'Last time we met you called me a base-born slave. Senor Henri, Marquis of Trejico, you will allow you were married in Louisiana,' he said.

"'I was; the girl I married was by birth, education, and connection a perfect lady,' I cried.

"'I know better,' he said, with his cold and fiendish sneer. 'I have been to Pensecola, where you were married. I have found out the man from whom you bought the quadroon, whom you married in a false aristocratic name. I have all the papers and the documents which passed; among your papers, I have found the bill of sale, the receipt for four thousand dollars, the fancy price this man charged you for the fair mother of your children?'

"I could not speak.

"I foamed at the mouth with rage.

"I struggled to get at him.

"'I have agreed to keep this dread secret from all. Even in modern and philosophical Mexico, you would not dare to introduce the children of a slave mother as your heiresses,' he continued; 'but I have revealed the secret to them. Hence they are as tame as lambs, and being what

they are, will only be too glad of the alliance offered them.'

"'Monster, villain, liar!' I gasped. 'Leave me—away! Let me not see your face more, let me not hear your foul voice. But you lie, you know you lie! My pure and noble daughter will never wed with a base-born negro—go!'

"With white face and distorted features, he left me, and again a long and weary blank ensued.

"Once more I tried to bribe my keeper, but wholly in vain.

"He was inexorable.

"He even threatened to withdraw the few indulgences which he allowed me.

"I began to think of escape, and searched my cell for some means of breaking the chain. I had shown myself so patient and submissive that the negro had ceased all precaution, would leave the door open while he cleansed out my cell, to which he brought clean straw once a week.

"But the only tool of any kind which I could find was a flint stone, with which I tried to break the links of my chain.

"In vain.

"Before I had had it one week in my possession, the negro entered my cell with a fierce and angry look.

"'What you hammer with?' he said; 'you tell me.'

"And the scoundrel raised a huge bludgeon to me.

"With a look of proud disdain, I cast it at his feet.

"'A very harmless weapon,' I said, wearily.

"He made no response, but searched my cell all over, and removed any chance loose stones that were scattered on the floor.

"The wretch was, I believe, in great fear of his employer, who probably paid him well for carrying out his fiendish and terrible duty. He was sulky and silent for some days, and only when I gave him another ring condescended to furnish me with some extras.

"Again weary days, months, it appeared years, passed away, and I seemed to grow old, very old.

"I became attenuated and thin, my appetite was wretched, and apathy stole gradually over me.

"Despite my wish to live for vengeance, there came almost a longing for death.

"It was, perhaps, a month since again my persecutor appeared before me.

"'Not dead yet?' he said, malignantly. 'I had scarcely hoped to see you again. Still, as you are alive I may make you useful.'

"I made no answer.

"'Your wife and daughters,' he went on, 'are giving

me great trouble. They have declared themselves heretics; and, as such, made themselves amenable to the laws.'

"'Thank Heaven!' I answered.

"'They are persecuted by two heretic lovers, whom they profess to love. Now, they are quite welcome to marry, so that they take not their large fortunes out of the country. Do you sign this document, giving me half your estates—it is dated five years ago—the other half to be divided between your daughters, and they shall be free.'

"'And if I refuse?'

"'Beware! They are prisoners in my hands, wholly at my mercy.'

"'Can I see them?'

"'Sign, and you shall see them, unknown to them; hear them speak.'

"'I will never disinherit my children,' I answered coldly.

"'Beware!' he coldly continued; 'I am weary of keeping you alive. It is a great deal of trouble and expense. I shall abandon the castle of Meriones soon, and shall not leave any one to wait on you.'

"'I do not understand.'

"'Your last food will be placed beside you, and you may trust to Providence for more,' he sneered.

"'Heaven will have mercy,' I said, 'if man has not. Do your worst.'

"And he went away, leaving me chilled with horror at the idea of starvation.

"The rest you know."

"It is an awful, a fearful story!" said the gallant colonel; "but this vile wretch shall now meet with the punishment he deserves."

It was resolved to rest until night, when, under cover of the darkness, they could re-enter the castle and take measures for the exposure and punishment of the arch criminal.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### FACE TO FACE.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when the whole party began their journey.

They reached the secret entrance to the cave without hindrance or molestation.

The l es were left in the cavern under the care of the guides, .d then the whole party, well armed, entered the building

The marchioness returned to her room while the others were concealed in neighboring apartments.

"Say nothing of my absence," said her mistress to Naomi, in a tone of calm resolution that rather surprised the girl; "but when your master returns, say that I wish to see him at once."

Soon after this there was a loud knocking at the gate.

We must not omit to mention that as soon as Naomi retired, Norah and Di installed themselves by the couch of the countess, who, despite her courage, was very helpless.

"Be brave, my dear madame," said Norah. "You have nothing to fear."

The loud voice of the supposed marquis was heard in the courtyard, and presently, booted and spurred, he entered the apartment, followed by his son.

Both started as they recognized the daughters of the colonel.

"To what," faltered the false marquis, "do we owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?"

"These young ladies, the friends and former playmates of my daughters, have come to visit them. I ask you at once to produce them," was the stern and haughty reply.

"Your daughters have left my guardianship. Doubtless they are by this time fleeing with their heretic lovers," was the response.

"Liar!" said the marchioness, rising, "fiend and liar, your crimes are ended. Behold the avenger!" she added, pointing to the doorway.

There stood the marquis, supported by Charles Leicester and Arthur Denby.

The villain turned to flee, but the doorway was blocked up by Colonel Fitzpatrick and three of the party.

The false marquis felt in his own mind that the game of life was up, but he determined to brazen it out.

"What a levee!" he said; "and who may this old maniac be?"

"Your brother and your judge! Wretch, for the years of suffering I have endured, you shall know what confinement is at the galleys!" cried the marquis, in a hollow tone. "Seize the wretches, and take them away lest I take the punishment into my own hands."

The false marquis drew a pistol from his belt and took steady aim.

"If I must die, I will not die alone," he said, with a loud laugh and fired.

His aim had been at his brother, over the shoulder of the gallant young American.

How it happened it was impossible to say, but following

the discharge of the pistol there was a cry, and then a scream of agony.

"Saved!" said the voice of Norah, who would have sunk to the ground but for the supporting arm of Charles Leicester.

"My God!" he cried, as the blood welled from her bosom, "the wretch has killed her!"

A scene of wild confusion followed.

All turned to look for the assassin.

He and his son had fled.

Charles lifted Norah on the couch which had been occupied by the marchioness.

"My poor girl," he said, "why did you do so foolish a thing? Better have let the villain slay me than lose your life—you so young, so beautiful."

"'Tis better so," she whispered, so faintly, none else could hear. "'Tis sweet to die for those we love. I may say that now," she continued, "and even Miriam cannot be jealous now."

Charles could make no reply.

That he had won the affections of that gentle and innocent heart he had long suspected, and so sweet was her nature, that but for his previous attachment to Miriam, he felt he could have loved the noble Irish girl.

And now to save him she was dying.

He could only press her hand, as her distracted father and sister leaned panting over her couch.

"My darling Norah," said the colonel, "surely something can be done. You will not let her die!"

"Stand back!" exclaimed the priest, who now entered. "She has not many minutes to live."

And as all respected his office. if they did not the man, they reverently drew back, while the poor, bleeding girl whispered some words to the priest, who gently prayed beside her.

Then he arose, and cast a veil over her face.

All was over.

The colonel was stunned as his daughter Di led him away.

"Where is the assassin?" cried Charles. "He shall not escape. With my own hands will I slay the miscreant!"

And closely followed by Denby and the young count, the unfortunate young man, innocent cause of the girl's death, dashed along the passages in search of the traitor.

"A thousand ounces for Trejico, dead or alive!" shouted the marquis.

Everybody dispersed in search of the false marquis, but neither he nor his son could be found.

He could not have left by the entrance, as the gates had been closed.

A patrol was organized to search the old ruin.

Charles Leicester was furious.

No thought of sleep entered his head.

He knew that at daylight a party would start in search of the girls, but he could take no rest.

Overlooking the gardens was a terrace, on which the two young men took their station when the house was still.

"Heavens!" cried Charles Leicester, as he walked up and down the terrace, "that such a fiend should have a chance of escape. Surely he cannot have got out of the castle by the connivance of some of the servants?"

"I think not. They seem truly glad to see their old master. No, he is surely in hiding somewhere," replied Denby; "an old castle like this must have many hiding-places."

As he said this in a whisper, they heard something like the sound of falling stones in the direction of the ruins.

"Hist!" said Charles, in a voice of deep and suppressed emotion; "here, in the shade."

Denby drew back under the wall and again listened.

The noise was repeated, and then they distinctly heard voices.

"Yonder," whispered Denby, pointing to an old tower, of which only a kind of well staircase remained intact.

They made out three men, three dark shadows, rather, descending the steps, many of which were loose, stones giving way as they cautiously descended.

Now this tower was on the other side of the garden, at a distance of nearly fifty yards.

There was a flight of steps going down to the garden, and down these the two young men went.

They carried pistols and a short dagger sword.

Dead or alive they meant to take them.

In a few minutes they had crossed the garden and were at the foot of the tower.

No one was visible.

"Where can they have hidden themselves?" said Charles; "what jugglery is this?"

"Hist!" replied Denby, as he heard the neighing of a horse at no great distance.

Both dashed down and found a postern gate open, through which the three men passed.

"Stop, or I'll fire!" shouted Charles, as he saw his prey escaping.

"Fire, and be hanged to you!" responded the false marquis; "any message for Sebano? I go to fetch my prize."

The two fired, but in the darkness probably without ef-

fect, as the next moment the horses were heard galloping down the side of the hill, the men laughing jeeringly.

"What is to be done?" cried Charles, hotly: "the villains are off to the convent. Heaven knows, in their desperation, what they may do."

"Up, and after them!" replied the young man; "not a moment is to be lost."

In the darkness and without a guide, it was impossible to reach the convent.

There was nothing for it but to wait.

It was nearly nine o'clock when, much refreshed in body and mind, the marquis joined the young Americans and heard their story.

The marquis shivered with horror.

"They are desperate men," he said, "and will do some desperate deed. If they can induce the abbess to give them up, they will secure the girls as hostages, and force us to terms."

"To horse!" replied the colonel, who came in with bloodshot eyes.

The fugitives had, however, eight hours the advance of them, and during eight hours much might be done.

Still all they could do was ride for their lives, and put their trust in Providence.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE FATE OF TREJICO.

AFTER his dastardly attempt to assassinate his brother, foiled by the loving devotion of the girl, the murderer stood for some minutes irresolute and stupefied.

Even he shivered wrth horror at his own deed.

He gazed wildly at his victim, and would certainly have fallen under the vengeful hand of Charles and the colonel but for the intervention of his son.

"Come away," he whispered; "are you mad? In a moment it will be too late."

And clutching his arm, he led his father away, and escaped in the confusion.

The son was well aware of the haunts of the negro, who himself well knew several hiding-places in the ruins.

There was one particular chamber in the thickness of the wall which he had discovered during his wanderings.

It was a kind of cell, with a low bench to sit on, which, when the place had been used, served the purpose of a bed.

It was a wretched, comfortless place with only some air holes for breathing.

But the negro contrived to procure food and drink.

They thus passed away the time until night, not daring hardly to speak.

The negro, when night came, ventured to descend and reconnoiter.

He easily moved about without attracting attention, and secured three horses, which he lead to a postern gate.

Then he once more rejoined his companions, who, breathless, descended from their ignoble position.

They moved with abject terror.

Despite their villainy and determination to a desperate deed, they felt that until they were out of the castle, there was no safety.

There were too many avengers of blood at their heels.

They, however, reached the postern in safety, and hurried over the bridge which crossed the moat.

Then came the startling interruption.

"I have to thank you very much, my American friends." said the false marquis, "but *carajo!* we shall see."

"Your plan, sir?" asked his son.

"I shall carry off the girls, collect my band around me, and make Miriam queen of the savannahs," cried the reckless man.

"You will openly break with society?" said the son.

"Yes; what else have I to do? In our forest and mountain home we can defy all the police and algnazils of Mexico," retorted his father. "Perhaps, however, it may not be necessary. If we secure the girls, we may obtain ransom and security for ourselves."

"And leave Mexico," said the son. "I rather think your sweet brother would make it too hot to hold us."

"Yes; France or the United States will be safer places than Mexico," cried the false marquis. "I have enough to live on in comfort. Fortunately, all my own money is in French Five per Cents."

"Yes, indeed," replied the son, with something of a sneer. "You have been looking forward to some such events."

Then they urged forward their horses at a hot and furious pace, aware that as soon as the proper instruments were collected, he would be pursued with unrelenting hate.

But the night, as we know, befriended them, and by mid-day they reached the plain in the center of which was the convent of Serano.

"I hardly know what to say," observed the false marquis. "The abbess may be suspicious, and refuse to give up the girls."

"I should have thought she would be glad to be released of the responsibility." said the son.

"You forget the money. The amiable lady principal is fully alive to the value of gold," he answered.

"But you could threaten an appeal to the cardinal archbishop."

"I may threaten? No, we must be cautious and humble. I must allege that I am sorry to confine them; besides, I find inquiries are being made, and that I must produce them."

They were soon hailed by the sentries and halted, while they took orders from within.

They were ordered to be admitted, and were at once shown to the *parloir* of the lady abbess.

"I had not hoped to see you so soon," said the abbess, with a scrutinizing glance.

"Well—well, gracious lady, on reflection, I have decided to take my nieces away. Their mother is on her deathbed, and nothing can satisfy her save a sight of her daughters."

"Indeed!" responded the lady, with a sarcastic smile, "you have suddenly changed your mind."

"Well, one cannot be wholly without feelings of humanity," he answered.

"Fortunately for you, they have not passed the inevitable Rubicon. They have only been placed in probatory cells. Had they known some of the mysteries and secrets of our house, no power on earth could have set them free."

Miriam and Maria were here ushered in.

"Your friends have come to take you away," said the abbess. "I hope you will be grateful."

"For what?" asked Miriam.

"So much forgiveness and kindness," she said.

"I have yet to learn in what the kindness consists," was the haughty reply.

"Your mother is seriously ill, and requires the presence of her children," continued the woman.

"Is this true, sir?" asked the girls, with one accord.

"Your mother is ill, and desires most anxiously to see you. Many things have happened since yesterday, which make your return to the world desirable," said the false marquis.

Miriam and Maria both detected a false ring in his voice, and yet the love of liberty, the anxiety to be near their mother, smothered every other feeling.

"We are ready to follow," they said, "if the abbess will allow us to prepare."

The abbess readily consented to lend them two saddle horses, and by four o'clock they were ready for departure.

The marquis was furious at the delay, which was par-

tially caused by their not daring to refuse the offer of a meal.

They fumed most furiously over it, but like everything else, even a convent meal comes to an end.

They then mounted, after bidding farewell to the abbess, and turned their backs on the dreary convent.

Afar off on the plain they made out a cloud of horsemen.

"Already," hissed the marquis, as he passed around to the back of the convent, and started for the hills behind, which were covered with a rich cloak of verdure.

"But this is not the way home!" cried Miriam, as they sped across the plain.

"You will soon find that it is," responded the false marquis, as he urged all the steeds at a rapid rate.

The girls could, of, course, make no resistance.

Meanwhile the pursuers were coming up.

Colonel Fitzpatrick rode forward and gave his name to the guard.

The abbess knew and respected the eminent Irishman, and was very polite.

"Madame, this is the real Marquis Di Trejico, and you have his daughters in your convent, placed here by a vile impostor, who calls himself by the title," he began.

"This is the marquis!" cried the woman, in dismay. "Why the man I knew as the marquis has just left with the girls."

"Left here long?"

"A quarter of an hour; he went the reverse way to which he came," she said, and indicated the direction.

None waited for further news, but in ten minutes were scouring over the plain, the fugitives in sight.

They could see the girls, and knew that their abductors were making every effort to escape.

Suddenly they saw him lift his pistols, and threaten the girls.

When the girls found that they had been deceived, and were not being taken in the direction of the Castle of Meriones, where their mother was supposed to be lying dangerously ill, they did all in their power to restrain the ardor of their horses.

"I will not be led away into some shameful and worse captivity," said Miriam. "False wretch, do your worst. I go no further!"

"You shall never fall alive into the hands of my mortal foes," replied the sham marquis, with glaring eyes.

As he spoke, he leveled a pistol at her head.

"Slay Maria!" he cried, to his son.

But the son was wise in his generation.

"To be slaughtered like sheep," was the somber reply, as he knocked up the pistol, which exploded in the air.

The girls were not slow to avail themselves of the opportunity as the pursuers came rushing up.

With a sudden jerk they turned around and darted away.

The two men made no attempt to follow, but Arthur, Charles and the count, with three others, bade the girls join their friends and wait for them.

When they returned, it was with the news that the false marquis had shot himself, the son escaping.

He was never heard of any more.

The marquis, disgusted with his country, and not wishing to part from his children, sold off his property, and transferred it all to his bankers in New York.

Six months later all were in the metropolis, and six months after that, Miriam became Mrs. Charles Leicester, and Maria, Mrs. Denby.

Their father and mother, with Colonel Fitzpatrick and Di, live near them, while Nora is never forgotten.

[THE END.]

# ESTHER.

*By the Author of "His First Love," "Dot," "The Captain's Daughter," "Nora's Sacrifice," &c.*

## CHAPTER I.

It was all very still out of doors. The snow had come in the night and covered the broad fields, making a great silence everywhere.

It was Sunday—early morning. The bells had not begun to chime from the dark church-tower. No one was astir in the little red-roofed houses of the village.

Only one line of footsteps broke the smoothness of the snow along the wide turnpike road—small footprints they were. They marked the white surface in a long unbroken line from the door of the great gabled house about a mile from the village to a grave close by the western door of the church. It was a new grave; but the snow had covered the grassless sods. The grave was not forgotten yet. A wreath of fresh flowers was laid upon it, and a weeping girl stood close beside it, thinking all joy and brightness had gone out of her life when the soul passed from the worn body of her who lay coffined beneath the snow.

The vicarage was close to the churchyard. It was a low house, with a veranda in front, and a beautiful garden, bounded by the river. The Vicar's study was a modern addition to the building. It was built on the churchyard side of the house, and had a deep bay-window that filled one end of the room.

The Vicar was fond of sitting in that window. He always wrote his sermons there. It was a fitting spot for such work. Being up-stairs—the breakfast-room was below—one could look across the churchyard wall, over the green graves. And east and west there were the gently-undulating fields, parted from each other by richly-wooded hedgerows or by the breadth of the placid river; while close at hand was the little village, with its music of human voices or human labor.

The Vicar liked the snow. He rose early, to enjoy the

white world outside his study window. The footsteps caught his eyes, as they wandered over the sparkling whiteness, and he followed them up, till he saw the flowers on the grave, and the little black figure, half hidden by the arch of the great door. His face changed slightly. It was a calm face, that showed little of the workings of the soul within, but it colored with some deep feeling, and tears were in his eyes, as he ran quickly down the shallow stairway and opened the breakfast-room door.

The apartment was a picture of brightness and comfort. The table was laid for breakfast for two, and the servant was just placing the toast and eggs. A young lady, very graceful and pretty, and dressed in a dark linsey, was standing by the fire-place, with her foot on the fender, reading the *Christian Year*. It was to her the Vicar spoke.

"Nannie, you have another cup laid—I am going to bring Esther Prideaux into breakfast."

"Why, Wilfred!"

But he was gone. A little gate led from the vicarage garden into the churchyard. He passed through this, and then it was hardly a dozen steps to the western door.

"Esther!"

She had not heard his step and looked up with a start.

"How cold you are!" he said, taking her hand. "Come—I am going to take you in to breakfast."

Her look touched him to the heart—it was so hopeless in its sorrow. Her eyes rested on his face for a moment, and then they were directed towards the snowy grave.

"She doesn't feel the cold?" she said almost questioningly, with a shudder in her voice.

"'And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it,'—you know the rest," returned the Vicar gently.

She made no answer, not even a look; and he took her hand again.

"Come, Miss Esther."

He had no resistance to deal with. She went with him at once. Nannie waited at the door, her amazement tempered by sympathy.

"My poor little darling!" she exclaimed, putting her arms round Esther, and drawing her to the fire. "You are almost frozen!"

She seated her in the easy-chair, and with quick hands drew off her boots, while the Vicar poured out a cup of coffee, and brought it to his little guest.

"I shall send William to the Lindens," he remarked, as he watched her drink it; "I think we deserve to have you for to-day. When do you go to London?"

"On Tuesday"—the answer was very low, and spoken

with a quiver of the lips that told of much pain behind the word.

The Vicar looked gravely into the fire, and then back at Esther's pale little face.

"So soon!" exclaimed Nannie, who was still kneeling on the rug. "And when shall we see you again, dear?"

The question broke up Esther's calmness.

"Never!" she sobbed out, resting her head upon Nannie's short brown curls. "Aunt is going to let the Linden's, and we are never coming back again."

"I should like you to define that dreadful word 'never,'" remarked the Vicar, quietly, though his lips trembled. "How many years does it mean, little Esther?"

She was too accustomed to answer him at once to hesitate now. She had been his pupil for a year or two, and the old habit of obedience was still strong upon her.

"Four," she answered, with a sort of gasp, as though the length of the years could not be measured in her mind.

"You will be of age then," said Nannie, with a sort of triumph in her tone. "You will come back to us, then, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" sobbed Esther. "I will never leave my dear home then—never again!"

"That word seems a great favorite with you," said the Vicar, smiling at her, though his smile was troubled. "Suppose we leave the future. It is in good hands."

He brought her breakfast to the fireside, and they petted and soothed her, till some of its usual brightness came back to the little white face.

The Vicar had sent to the Lindens to say that Esther would remain for the day; but just before church-time a handsome carriage drove up to the Vicarage gates. Mrs. Prideaux presented her compliments to Mr. Clare, and she wished Miss Prideaux to return home at once.

The Vicar received the message, and went back to Esther.

"You must go home, dear."

"I am going to stay," said Esther, without stirring from her seat. "The carriage may go away. Aunt has no right to send for me."

"My dear, you must go," answered the Vicar gently. "I have taught you many lessons, Esther. Let this be the last—the lesson of obedience."

She started up, and came across the rug to his side.

"Not the last," she cried; "I could not bear to think that! When I am of age, I will come back, and you will teach me again. Don't forget me, Mr. Clare; remember your pupil a little."

"I promise not to forget you," he answered, taking both her hands. "Heaven bless you, Esther, and give you peace. Take comfort in your life, my dear. There will be new friends in it soon."

"Never like the old? Never like you!" was the passionate answer.

The Vicar's sister came in then, indignant and pained at the summons for Esther. But Mr. Clare checked her hasty remonstrances.

"Esther must go, my dear," he said.

Nannie was silent; but she kissed and cried over Esther, with the impulsive affection which some natures give so freely. Esther bore her caresses without repulse, but she was keen-hearted enough to value more the Vicar's lingering clasp of her hand; and it was his face she looked at as she bent forward as the carriage whirled her away.

He was standing on the steps, looking after her; even after the carriage had turned the corner of the road, he stood there. His sister called to him impatiently at last.

"Do come in, Wilfred. The draught is horrible, and it is so bad for your throat."

He closed the door, making some light reply to his sister, and went back to the study.

The bells were ringing merrily now, and people were flocking up the church path. It was nearly time for the Vicar to go, but his thoughts held him. He would have done with them, if he could, before beginning the sacred work of the day.

He had been appointed Vicar of Charlewort'i four years before, and a strong friendship had sprang up between him and Mrs. Prideaux, the lady of the Manor. She was a great invalid, and it pleased her that Esther, her only child, should have more cheerful society, and Esther liked to be at the Vicarage with the Vicar and his sister; and the Vicar helped her in her studies when the governess went away, and a bright pleasant life had gone on that seemed as if it might last forever.

One sad heart felt the end coming in the dreary autumn days. Mrs. Prideaux loved life for Esther's sake, and she was not sure of it for an hour, knew it could not be hers for long. Her husband had left her sole guardian of Esther; but, at her death, if Esther was still unmarried, her uncle was to have the charge of her.

This was a sore trouble to Mrs. Prideaux, for her husband's brother and his wife were people she disliked extremely. It was natural, as she meditated upon her darling's future, and shrank from giving her to coarse unloving hands that would not shield or guard her, that she should think of Mr. Clare. With him she could trust

Esther, sure of her being sheltered and watched over as she had always been.

"Marry her before I die, Wilfred," she said to him one day, "and I shall not have a care left. Esther loves you; I am sure she does."

That was what the Vicar thought of, as he paced his study once or twice, on that Sunday morning. His answer to the dying woman had been a noble and manly one. He had begged her to leave her child to Heaven, and be content that her future was well cared for. Esther was so young, she could not know her own heart, he had wisely said; and yet his heart ached on this day with keen regret. For he loved the child dearly—as deeply as such a calm nature as his could love anything earthly; and for a few moments he wished he had chosen the bright path, and made his worldly future sure. And poor little Esther—he would have made her so happy. His very unselfishness made his trouble all the worse to bear.

"Wilfred—Wilfred!" called his sister.

He hurried down-stairs, with a prayer upon his lips for help; and help came to him in the deep, sweet consciousness that, whatever the end should be, he had done right.

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## CHAPTER II.

WHAT an untidy room it was! The governess looked around it in dismay, as she stood on the threshold with a lamp in her hand. The children had been left alone for an hour, while she helped their elder sisters to finish some mourning-dresses, and the little rebels had dragged every book on to the floor, under the pretense of dusting the shelves, and rolled the strip of carpet into one corner, in company with the table and the globes.

Fred, "the pickle," was on his knees before the blazing fire, brushing the fender with a black-lead brush, requisitioned from the kitchen. Miss Dora, with her dress tucked up, and a handkerchief over her bright curls, was quarreling with her younger sister for the broom. The contest had just come to the stage of muscular force when Miss Hatton appeared on the scene. There was another girl in the room, seated cozily in the corner by the fire, a book propped on her knees, reading hard, with her hands tight over her ears. It was to her Miss Hatton spoke first.

"Can't you try to keep a little more order, Ellen, instead of mooning there over that silly poetry? This room is simply disgraceful."

"You can't expect them to obey me, when they won't obey you," was the answer, in a sulky manner.

Miss Hatton made no answer, but turned to the combat-

ants, who had proclaimed an armistice for a moment, and stood regarding her under their sullen brows.

"Dora, Marion—I must insist on more ladylike behavior. Your cousin will be shocked. And just look at the room! Ellen, get up this moment, and put it tidy."

"You shouldn't have come in so soon," remarked Fred, who was still brushing away with cheerful energy. "We should have made it tidy soon."

"Indeed!" returned Miss Hatton, putting the lamp upon the table, and looking at Ellen.

She rose slowly from her corner, and commenced to drag the things into their proper places. Dora and Marion never attempted to help. They had drawn aside together, murmuring sullenly against Miss Hatton. When the governess found that her commands were obeyed by Ellen, she turned to Fred, who took not the slightest notice of her, and commenced to whistle "Yankee Doodle," as he polished the well-worn steel.

"Do you hear what I say, sir? Get up at once, and go and wash your face and hands. They are perfectly black."

"Queen Anne's dead," remarked Fred coolly, continuing his whistle after this polite reply.

The fender was finished to his liking by this time however, and he got up from off his knees and playfully aimed the brush at Miss Hatton.

"Don't be waxy, old woman! I'll be got up in A 1 style to meet our wonderful cousin. I'm going to help Ellen a bit."

He marched off to the other end of the room, where the books had been heaped. Ellen, in a breathless, passionate way, was picking them up and piling them upon the shelves. She turned as the boy came near, and tried to hide her face; but he caught hold of her short, straggling hair and turned her forcibly round to meet his sympathizing look. The girl's handsome dark eyes were flashing with suppressed anger. Her whole face was livid with the strong emotion that had no relief in words. The boy had seen her with such a look once or twice before—once when Dora had jeered at her about her father, and she had almost killed her with a blow. Fred was frightened, and helped her to put up the books in silence, though once or twice he touched her hand softly, with a gesture of a loving brother.

Miss Hatton was putting before the sisters the advisability of dressing for tea.

"Your mamma wishes your cousin Esther to have tea here. As she is to be one of the school-room party, she may as well begin at once."

"I don't see who cousin Esther is that we need dress for

her," returned Marion, moving off, however, after Dora, who was always ready to adorn her fair little person.

By this time the room had resumed its usual appearance. A blank, dreary room it was at the best of times, tintless and comfortless—a long, narrow room, with three uncurtained windows on one side, looking out from a dizzy height on a London street. It was Miss Hatton's home, poor soul, and she was to be forgiven any little failure of temper.

Fred walked off to restore his complexion to something like its proper color, and the governess was left alone with her eldest pupil. Ellen had finished the books and gone back to the fire-place—but not to read. She placed her elbows upon the high guard and rested her head upon her hands, looking gloomily into the fire.

Miss Hatton had gone to look after her rebellious pupils, and Ellen was alone, when the school-room door opened hastily to admit Mrs. Prideaux and the expected visitor. Ellen had never seen any one so fair and gentle-looking as the young girl who entered in deep mourning, and her desolate heart went out to Esther at once.

Mrs. Prideaux's introduction was characteristic.

"This is Ellen, my dear. In a day or two she is going away to learn to become a useful member of society."

"I am very glad," returned Ellen defiantly.

Esther kissed her.

"Are you going to school then?" she said. "I am sorry, dear. We should be friends."

Mrs. Prideaux had turned to the door. Footsteps dear to her were coming up the stairs—her darling's, her idol's—handsome Percy. He was the son of her first marriage in the far-off time, when Mrs. Prideaux was young and she loved him best of all. He came in, a smiling beautiful lad, in the first bloom of manhood.

He and Esther clasped hands, and looked into each other's eyes, she reading kindly sympathy in his, he seeing beauty and gentleness in hers. Ellen was forgotten; and she went away to her lonely room, to half break her heart, wishing for gentle ways and soft blue eyes like Esther's, so that she too might be loved.

Esther, in the kindly feeling sorrow gives, made a good deal of Ellen for the first few days, till the bleak morning when the lonely girl started on her journey to the school in North Wales, where she was to be trained for a governess. Esther kissed her good-bye, and gave her a pretty gold locket with her likeness in it, and promised to write to her often.

Promises are easily given, and Esther really meant hers at the time. But the days went on, and her sorrow grew

lighter day by day, as a new joy came into her life. Mrs. Prideaux had hoped and planned; but she had never expected such speedy fulfillment of her hopes. She was the happiest on that summer evening when Percy came to tell her that Esther had promised to be his wife.

"When you have taken your degree, my darling," the mother said, when he spoke of marriage. "Oh, Percy, this is the happiest moment of my life!"

They all went to Scotland for the summer. Fred wanted Esther to ask for Ellen to be allowed to come with them; but Esther had so much to think of that she forgot Fred's request, and Ellen never came home. Nobody thought of her but Fred—she was dropped out of the family life. It would have been just the same if she had been miserable; but Mrs. Prideaux had unwittingly found a tender home for Ellen, and a mother's care, when she placed her with Mrs. Forsyth. While Percy and Esther were in the dream of first love, Ellen, in the pretty house among the Welsh mountains, was earning a child's place in Mrs. Forsyth's heart.

Between Ellen and the schoolmistress a deep and strong affection sprang up, and Mrs. Forsyth's kindly influence sweetened and made beautiful the ardent nature of the girl. Llandinvawr air and sunshine, and the regular life, and the tender, motherly care rounded Ellen's cheeks and lit her eyes with light and her lips with smiles.

And the years went on.

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## CHAPTER III.

THREE years is a long time to look forward to; but how quickly it passes when no great sorrow comes to lengthen moments of pain.

For Esther the three years were as a beautiful summer day, a day in June, when none of the flowers are dead and no presage of winter tempest and decay comes from earth and sky.

The third spring found all the family at the Lindens. Esther's marriage had been fixed for the autumn before; but it was postponed because of the illness of Mr. Prideaux. He died at Christmas, very little missed or sorrowed for. The wedding was then fixed for May; and when the red dawn of the morning of the year was on the trees, and the first primroses bloomed under the ruddy boughs, the Prideaux family came down to Esther's home.

Mr. Clare felt keenly that he was allowed to hear of their arrival only from the gossip of the village. Esther's correspondence with the Vicar had dropped—old friends had little chance to be remembered in the first flush of her new

happiness. Yet Esther never meant to be unkind; natures like hers can do the cruelest things and never realize the pain they give. She had not forgotten Mr. Clare; and in any trouble her thoughts would have gone back to him as a bird to its mother's nest. But she did not need him now.

Mr. Clare accepted his position calmly; still it was hard at first—hard to meet Esther after those years of parting, and have no words with her but those that the merest acquaintance could have shared. Esther cared more to talk to Nannie than with her brother; for Nannie, too, was engaged, and would be married in the summer. So the two girls had long talks in the vicarage drawing-room, while Percy walked up and down the garden with the Vicar, talking and arguing over the scientific problems of the day.

Percy, since leaving college, had been proceeding with his studies. Women's talk tired him, though he did not confess it, even to himself; and it was a relief to get away from the drawing-room circle and the dreary platitudes of his women-folk, to have an hour's "grind" at mathematics, or to read the last new thing from scientific circles. He tried now and then to interest Esther in his work, but he might as well have talked to a butterfly of the theory of evolution and the constancy of natural law.

"Now, if you are going to be wise, I shall run away," Esther would say, putting her hands over her ears, and looking bewitching in her petulance. "I never could understand words of more than three syllables."

So Percy gave up the attempt, and walked placidly by his lady-love, under the deepening shadows of the lindens, trying to feel intensely happy, but all the time being rather bored.

He and the Vicar became great friends. Esther was busy about her *trousseau*, and deep in consultation with Mrs. Prideaux and the dressmaker for a good deal of the day. So Percy was glad to go down to the vicarage and talk to Mr. Clare.

So the days slipped by.

It was the middle of April. Percy had hardly noticed how the days were passing, but the rest of the month was to be the crisis of his life. A great deal of discussion had been going on between the ladies over their fancy-work all day; Percy, leaning back on the sofa, with the *Quarterly* in his hand, had a dim idea that something was being decided about that uncomfortable cousin whom Fred was so fond of.

"What was mother saying about Ellen?" he asked, as he walked with Esther in the garden.

"Oh, Miss Hatton is wanted somewhere or other! Her

brother is dying, I believe. Fancy Miss Hatton with a brother and natural affections! But she is going, and auntie has decided upon sending for Ellen to take charge of the children while she is away."

"Fred will be delighted," was Percy's only remark on the subject.

Two or three days afterward Mrs. Prideaux and her daughters and Esther had driven to the next town on a shopping expedition. Percy went down to the vicarage; but Mr. Clare had gone on parish business to the village, about a couple of miles from the Lindens, where a railway-station had lately been built. Percy, for want of something to do, walked on along the level turnpike-road, in the hope of meeting the Vicar. It was a warm day, and the road was slightly dusty, but the sweet-smelling hedges were bright with flowers, and a fresh breeze blew across the plowed fields.

About a mile along the road, a gate in the hedge revealed a pathway, green with early grass, between two high banks of short soft moss. The banks at the top were crowned by some stately trees, and the shadows of the young leaves fell cool and pleasant upon the footpath below. Percy was glad to leave the dusty road, to have the grass beneath his feet and the arching bows above him. He walked on, whistling softly to himself, and enjoying the coolness and the pleasant silence.

The lane descended slowly toward the village, with many devious turnings, so that one could see only a few steps in advance; and Percy suddenly came to a stile leading to a footpath across some fields. A tall girlish figure was leaning over the stile, turned from Percy. He had time to notice the pretty quaintness of the simple dress, and the exquisite grace of the girl's drooping attitude, before she took her arms from off the bar and stepped back to let him pass. She glanced at him carelessly in doing so, and Percy saw, as their eyes met, how her expression changed and her face colored.

"You don't know me, Percy? I am your cousin Ellen!"

"Really!" He clasped her hand. "Didn't my mother know? Why didn't somebody meet you?"

"Oh, I don't know! It doesn't matter. But I shall be glad if you will show me my way. This is all strange ground."

Percy could not realize that this was Ellen, this beautiful girl.

"And you are happy at—at—that place?"

A curious look passed over Ellen's face.

"Yes; I am very happy at that place. I hope Miss Hatton's relative will soon recover."

Percy hoped differently. He felt that it would be very sweet to have Ellen in the house.

They walked back, talking a great deal. Percy found out that Ellen knew some college friends of his, who had gone down for a reading-party to Wales during the summer before. Ellen talked of them quite frankly, though her color came and went, as Percy went on to speak of one of the party who had taken very high honors.

"And you knew Forbes?"

"A little. He is Mrs. Forsyth's cousin. He did well?"

"I should think so! Forbes is one of the few who will be our leaders in the future. He was a great favorite at college."

Ellen did not answer. A close observer would have seen, in her trembling lips and the look of her dark eyes, the evidence of some strong emotion, but Percy never noticed it.

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## CHAPTER IV.

ESTHER found it convenient to accept Ellen's declaration that she was very happy and contented in the school-room. Esther was so busy and so happy that no time was left to make others happier. Ellen was left pretty much alone by the women-folk. Mrs. Prideaux went into the school-room once or twice a day to lecture and admonish, and the elder girls never lost an opportunity of making Ellen feel her position; but, for the greater part of the bright spring days, the young governess was left alone with her pupils, except for Percy's frequent visits.

He was a great deal in the school-room. He soon found that Ellen could appreciate his pursuits, and it became a usual thing for him to bring his books and talk to her about them. Ellen could converse well, and they had many an argument on the current topics of the day.

Percy was not given to analyze the causes that made a thing pleasant to him. Unconsciously his thoughts took a new color. He had no idea of being disloyal to Esther; he would have pronounced it an impossibility to love any other woman than the one he intended to make his wife in a month; but feelings are above rule. Before a fortnight of the month had passed Percy loved Ellen as he had never loved Esther, as he never could love her. It was accident that showed him the true state of his feelings. Fred was come home. He was a sailor now, and as fond of Ellen as ever. Percy found his talks with his cousin an impossibility, now that Fred was always in the school-room.

"You care more for Fred than for me," he said to Ellen bitterly.

"I care more for Fred than for anybody else—you know I do," she returned meeting, the glance of his angry, passionate eyes.

"More than anybody else in the world? Really Ellen?" She colored so deeply that it was not hard to guess that there was somebody dearer still.

"Is there 'one other'?" he said, in the breathless tone of intense emotion.

They were standing at the school-room window. It was open, and Percy, as he asked the question, crushed with his hot hands the vine-leaves that clung round the sill.

"The poor little leaves!" said Ellen, to whom Percy's state of mind was perfectly unknown. She put her hand playfully upon his, to keep him from destroying the pretty green things.

The slight touch went through him like fire. He forgot everything in one mad impulse, and caught both her hands and drew her closely to him.

"Ellen, Ellen, I love you!"

He would have gone on recklessly and passionately, had not the expression of Ellen's face stopped and chilled him. Contempt, disdainful pity, awful surprise—he could see them all. He dropped her hands, and covered his face with his own.

"It is true. Heaven forgive me, I couldn't help it, Ellen! Why did you come here?"

'Hush!" she said, in an imperative, almost comtemptuous tone. "You are not yourself to-day, cousin Percy. You are a good, true man, and you will marry Esther in a fortnight—dear little Esther!"

"Do you wish to drive me mad?" he asked passionately. "Of course I shall marry her. But I love you. Don't look at me like that, cousin Ellen—was it my fault? Our feelings are not our own to control."

"Our words are," she said, coldly.

"If you knew what love meant, you would feel for me," he returned. "But you don't; you have no pity."

She looked up bravely into his face.

"Cousin Percy, I do know what love means. Some one I knew once used to like to talk with me. He liked me a little, but I loved him dearly—I always shall. Still it doesn't prevent my being happy."

Fred's gay step on the stairs interrupted them. Ellen went to the table and took up her work, and Percy stood with his back to the room, looking out of the window. Fred had been into the town with his sisters.

"I have brought you your books, Nellie. Do you know,

I met a friend of yours in the shop as I was getting them?"

"Did you? Who was it?"

"A fine-looking fellow. He was with a party of jolly-looking girls. The *mater* knows them, and they were all talking together, while I asked for your books. The tall unknown was looking over some volumes close beside me. I said the books were for Miss Chandos, but the man pulled down two editions of Horace, and I didn't know which to to take. While I was hesitating, the man at my side remarked, in the coolest way, 'I beg your pardon, but Miss Chandos uses this edition,' taking up one of them. I gazed at him in mute astonishment, and he added, with the jolliest of smiles, 'Miss Chandos and I are old friends. Will you tell her Arthur Forbes chose her Horace?'"

Ellen took up the book, coloring painfully.

"Yes, this is the right one. Thank you, Fred."

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"Suppose we all go over to see this grand cricket-match to-morrow," remarked Mrs. Prideaux at dessert that evening. "The Davenants were telling me about it to-day. It will be a good affair. You will see some of your college friends there, Percy."

"Shall I?" he remarked, carelessly. "I can't say I feel intensely delighted at the idea."

"Some of the eleven are staying with the Davenants," said Esther.

"What a fine-looking fellow that was with them!"

Fred smiled to himself over his walnuts.

"He is the captain of the eleven," remarked his eldest sister. "Mary Davenant told me that he has just succeeded to a handsome fortune."

"I should like to go to-morrow," said Esther. "A cricket-match is great fun."

"Can't Ellen go, *mater?*" asked Fred, who never lost a chance of pleading the cause of his favorite, and had a special reason for wishing Ellen to go to the cricket-match.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Prideaux sharply.

"I don't see why she shouldn't," remarked Fred stoutly. "Do let her go!"

"Yes, please let her go," said Esther, who was given to compunction of conscience on Ellen's account.

Mrs. Prideaux rarely resisted any appeal of Esther's; so she said graciously enough:

"Well, if Ellen cares to go; but I hope she has too much sense to wish to mingle in scenes quite unfitted to her lot in life."

But Ellen did not prove worthy of Mrs. Prideaux's good opinion. She accepted the ungracious invitation at once, and joined the party in the hall next morning, dressed

very quietly, but with exquisite taste. Mrs. Prideaux made a rule of ignoring her niece's existence on all public occasions; but Esther greeted her with a pleasant smile, and Fred rushed up with a knot of pink ribbons.

"Ellen, wear the same colors that I do. I chose them because I knew they would suit you," he added in a whisper.

"A reason worthy of you," said Ellen, laughing. "But whose colors are they? I don't care to wear the badge of a party I know nothing about."

"The match, my dear innocent cousin," returned Fred, "is to be played between the regiment stationed at Woking and a club composed of fellows who have got a degree at Cambridge. The pink is the military color."

Ellen took the knot of ribbons, but she did not fasten it in her dress, and not all Fred's badinage could make her do so.

Percy avoided her pointedly. Ellen felt irritated beyond measure with him. She could not believe in the reality of his feelings, and could not bear to think of what he had told her. She held it as showing the most contemptible weakness, even if it were true, which she doubted.

Fred drove her and two of his younger sisters in the little pony-carriage. Ellen was to go in the character of the governess, as she persisted in going. She felt her position no indignity, and was very bright and merry. For some reason she was intensely excited. Her cheeks were flushed with an exquisite color, and her eyes were brighter than Fred had ever seen them.

The match was to be played on the Woking cricket-ground, a piece of flat grass-land by the river, surrounded by some noble trees. A number of gayly-dressed visitors had arrived, and gay flags were fluttering from the tents erected at each end, and the regimental band played enlivening airs at intervals.

The Prideaux family knew a number of people, and they joined a large group under the trees. Ellen stood a little apart with Fred and her pupils.

"My governess," Mrs. Prideaux said to her friends.

Ellen heard it, and smiled. She did not care in the least. As she chatted with Fred her eyes wandered restlessly over the groups. He was watching her with a mischievous smile, and her sudden start and color made him follow the direction of her glance.

A group of ladies with blue ribbons in their dresses, attended by some good-looking men, had just entered the ground. They walked slowly up under the trees, toward the spot where Ellen and her party stood. The youngest of the Davenants, a pretty girl, had fallen a little behind,

chatting gayly to her companion, a very handsome, manly fellow. He was fair, with the brightest of blue eyes and a golden mustache. He was talking merrily enough to his companion, but his eyes wandered eagerly round. Ellen did not glance in his direction again; but he saw her, and stepped forward, and whispered something to a sweet-faced woman in front. Her eyes sought Ellen at once, and rested on her with evident approval.

Fred watched all this by-play, and was quite prepared for what followed. The Davenants joined the group where the Prideaux were standing, and a great deal of greeting went on. Ellen tried to talk carelessly to Fred, but her voice faltered. A few moments of suspense, a dreary feeling that she was forgotten, and then a frank voice with a tremor of emotion in it said at her side:

"Did you get your Horace, Miss Chandos?"

She turned quickly, and shook hands with the speaker. With the tenderest of glances the blue eyes met hers. Ellen felt dizzy with happpiness.

"I went to North Wales last week," he said in a low voice. "Mrs. Forsyth told me you were here. I am so glad you came to-day."

"Yes?"

"I should have come to see you to-morrow, though," said Mr. Forbes, looking smilingly at the down-dropped eyes. "But I want you to know my mother, and she wants to know you."

He stepped back, and called her; and Ellen had an earnest welcoming shake of the head, and a kindly glance from eyes that were enough like Arthur's to make her love them at once. Then more introductions followed between the Davenants and Miss Chandos.

Fred disappeared with the unruly pupils, and Ellen found herself seated under the trees by Mrs. Forbes, and the Misses Davenant and Arthur standing at her side, the latter neglecting his duties as captain to talk to her for a few moments.

"You have no colors," he said. "Little traitress, you do not dare to be neutral?"

"No," she returned, with an upward look at him that was delicious to meet.

"Miss Davenant," he said, "have you a bit of blue ribbon? The fortunes of the day depend upon my getting some."

Miss Davenport had a roll of ribbon in her pocket and a roll was soon cut off and knotted into a bow for Ellen's neck. Then Arthur went off to his work, and Ellen talked to Mrs. Forbes, all the time watching her son's tall figure,

with a look that a man receives only from one pair of eyes all his life.

Ellen's reception by Mrs. Forbes and the Davenants, the most distinguished people on the ground, was not lost on Mrs. Prideaux and her daughters. They could not understand it; and their amazement and annoyance were increased more and more as the day went on. There was no mistaking Arthur Forbes's attention to the young governess. "What does he mean by it?" said Mrs. Prideaux to Percy. "If Ellen was anybody else, I should say——"

Percy interrupted her savagely with—

"It doesn't require much perception to see what Arthur Forbes means, mother. He and Ellen are old friends and quite understand each other."

Percy was looking intensely wretched and ill-tempered His mother and sisters put it down to the heat of the day, Esther to a mild flirtation she was carrying on with one of the officers of the regiment. Only one person was clear-sighted enough to detect some deeper reason for the young man's haggard face. Mr. Clare did not care particularly for cricket, but he had brought his sister; and now he stood a little apart from the merry groups, watching by turns Esther and her lover. Esther was seated on the grass, evidently intensely happy. Something in her face reminded Mr. Clare of the rhapsody of the water wagtail—

"It was for my accommodation
Nature rose when I was born;
Should I die, the whole creation
Back to nothing would return.
Sun, moon, stars, the earth, you see,
All the world was made for me."

The Vicar smiled as he quoted the verse to himself, but it was a sad smile. He knew enough of human life to feel that Esther had bitter schooling in store for her. His eyes turned to Percy, who certainly looked very unlike a happy lover; and something of the truth came to him, as he saw how Percy's eyes were on Ellen, even while he talked to his betrothed.

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## CHAPTER V.

MRS. PRIDEAUX was very cross to Ellen when they reached home, and lectured her severely about her behavior during the day. But Ellen was too happy to care for anything. Something Arthur had whispered to her as they parted, made her utterly careless as to her aunt's bitter words. She saw her pupils safely in bed, and, too excited to sit still in the school-room, she threw a shawl

over her shoulders, and went out into the fresh dewy garden.

The moon was full, and the clear light shone pleasantly down upon the Lindens. Ella walked slowly up and down the broad walk under the trembling shadows. There was a nightingale singing in a bush close by, and its full exquisite song seemed an echo of the gladness in her heart.

The drawing-room windows were open, and she could hear Esther playing. Esther played correctly; but Ellen could hardly bear to hear the spiritless rendering of one of her favorite sonatas; and she turned and walked further away from the house, down a walk bordered on each side by high laurels. There was a little shrubbery at the end of the walk, with a summer-house in it. The moonlight fell clearly through the lattice-work, and Ellen saw at once, as she turned the corner, that Percy was seated at the little table, with his head buried in his hands. He heard her steps, and started up before she could draw back.

"Ellen, stay one moment! I shall never ask anything of you again; let me speak to you now!"

Ellen stood still, and he came to her side, and looked wildly into her face.

"This Arthur Forbes," he said—"are you going to marry him?"

"Yes," answered Ellen unshrinkingly. "Percy, dear cousin Percy, what a happy life you will have with darling Esther!"

"Hush!" he said, in a tone that frightened Ellen, brave as she was. "I can never marry her; how can I? I hate her, Ellen! I hate her smooth selfish ways and her silly face! I will not marry her!"

Percy was but a boy still, and Ellen pitied him with the mother-feeling all true women have. He leant back against the summer-house door and covered his face with his hands, with a gesture of utter despair. Ellen went to his side, and put her hand gently upon his shoulder.

"Be true to your own true self, dear Percy," she said earnestly. "This madness will pass, and leave manhood unsullied, if you will only be strong."

"Oh, Ellen, I cannnot help it! I love you more than heaven and earth. What shall I do, dear?"

In pitiful trust he rested his head upon her shoulder. Ellen touched his brow lightly with her hand, and smoothed back the damp hair. What could she say? Some words were on her lips, when a hasty exclamation startled them both. Percy hastily drew back from Ellen; and they both turned, to see Mrs. Prideaux and Esther standing in the moonlight. Ellen did not speak; she stood perfectly still, while Percy went forward and addressed Esther.

"I don't know what you have heard," he said. "I will tell you the truth now. I have never really loved you. It was all a bitter mistake. I am thankful you have found it out before it was too late!"

With a gesture he stopped his mother's exclamation.

"It is not Ellen's fault, mother; she is engaged to Arthur Forbes. I am to blame, if there is any blame. Esther and I were too young to know our own minds when we were engaged."

"I don't understand," said Esther, faintly. "Don't you care for me at all, Percy?"

Mrs. Prideaux took her arm.

"Come away, Esther darling. Ellen Chandos has repaid the care I have given her by ruining my life."

But Ellen was gone. Percy attempted to speak; but his mother would not hear him, and he was left alone.

Esther could not realize what had happened. She hardly believed it, even the next morning, when a letter was brought to her from Percy. He had gone away; he was never coming back any more. The gilded future that had been so near to Mrs. Prideaux had come down with an awful crash.

Poor little Esther! She read the letter that had cost Percy half the night to write, gradually getting the truth into her stunned brain. Then she put it away from her, into her desk—a little ivory inlaid toy, full of Percy's letters and his presents. She dressed with as much care as usual, and went down to the breakfast-room very white and quiet. Mrs. Prideaux met her at the door.

"I was coming to you, my darling."

"Thank you," said her niece, looking steadily into her face. "I am quite well. I should like my breakfast."

She passed Mrs. Prideaux and sat down at the gayly-appointed table and poured out her coffee with a steady hand. No one else was in the room. Mrs. Prideaux leaned over the back of her niece's chair and touched her hair tremblingly.

"Oh, Esther, Esther!"

But Esther did not speak.

"It was all Ellen's fault. Percy will come to his senses soon, and we shall all be happy again."

Esther's smooth face hardened.

"I shall never forgive him, aunt. We are parted for ever. He may marry Ellen if he likes."

The entrance of Mrs. Prideaux's daughters stopped the pleading of the miserable mother, and the breakfast went on, Esther talking a little more than usual. After breakfast Mr. Forbes was announced. He asked to see Miss

Chandos, but Mrs. Prideaux had given orders that he was to be shown into the drawing-room where she was.

After a little desultory conversation, Mr. Forbes requested to see Ellen; and Mrs. Prideaux, who had with difficulty controlled herself for so long, hastened to tell him the story of the previous night, after a fashion of her own. Mr. Forbes listened gravely, but he made no remark of any sort. He could have told Mrs. Prideaux that he had seen Percy that morning, and had had a long talk with him; but he said nothing till the story was finished. Then he asked to see Ellen. His quiet, determined manner had effect on Mrs. Prideaux; and, after some hesitation, she went up to the schoolroom. Ellen was there, going through the usual routine, and looking very much distressed and excited.

"Mr. Forbes wants to speak to you. I have told him everything, Ellen. He knows what an ungrateful, wicked girl you are."

Ellen looked pitifully into her aunt's face.

"Oh, aunt, I never thought—I would rather anything but this had happened!"

But Mrs. Prideaux turned away coldly. She would never forgive her niece.

Ellen went down-stairs. All her nerves were throbbing with pain. Her trembling hand could scarcely open the drawing-room door. She looked timidly into her lover's face when she entered—only one look; the next moment her face was hidden, and she was held tightly in his arms.

"My darling, my poor darling!"

* * * * * * *

Ellen went back to Llandinvawr next day; and in the autumn she was married. By that time Percy was teaching in one of the public schools, and Mrs. Prideaux had gone to live with him. For her heart yawned for her darling boy, and she found her position very different at the Lindens now. Esther had a quiet way of asserting her authority as mistress which was very galling to bear. So the Lindens were let again, and Esther went abroad under the chaperonage of an old friend of the family. It was two years before she came back.

Ellen was living in London; and she and Esther often met in society. It was about six months after Esther's return to England, when Mrs. Arthur Forbes and Miss Prideaux were invited to a brilliant garden-party at Lady Mowbray's pretty house at Twickenham.

Since her marriage Ellen had not had any long conversation with the heiress; and she was rather surprised when Esther drew her away from the knot of clever talkers that always gathered round Mr. Forbes's brilliant wife.

"I want to tell you something, Ellen," she said, with a little quiver in her voice. "I am going to be married!"

Ellen looked at her without speaking; but Esther understood the look of her eyes.

"Oh, no, no—not to Percy—I have forgotten him—to Mr. Clare! He has loved me all my life, Ellen."

Percy never married. He became a famous man; but he was never very rich, and he died before his mother. Esther was happy as a rector's wife. The existence suited her, and she was considered a most exemplary and beautiful-minded woman. There was no one, however, who understood her better than her husband, much as he loved her.

[THE END.]

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